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“A TRAINED AND TRUSTFUL SOUL”:
LIFE AND LITERATURE OF A BLACK LOUISVILLE ARTIST IN MINSTREL
AMERICA

By

Emma Christine Bryan
B.A., Bellarmine University, 2017

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
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for the Degree of

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A Thesis Approved on

April 5, 2019

by the following Thesis Committee

Thesis Director
Lara Kelland

Tyler Fleming

David Anderson

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to

Sarah Elizabeth McCoy,

in whom I have found a

colleague, a confidant, and a life-long friend.

Thank you for making this journey all the more enjoyable.

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ABSTRACT

“A TRAINED AND TRUSTFUL SOUL”:
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April 5, 2019

This thesis explores the century-long theatrical expression of blackface minstrelsy within the larger context of the United States, but specifically studies its popularity in Louisville, Kentucky from 1878 to 1925. This study is meant to bring to the fore the pervasiveness of blackface minstrelsy, and how it was used to demean, degrade, and oppress African American populations before, during, and well after Emancipation. This work is not meant to memorialize the craft of minstrelsy, however, but rather attempts to show how black individuals of the time were actively working to both reclaim the detrimental stereotypes of blackface minstrelsy, while also intentionally creating a new dialogue in their literature and artistry as a form of racial uplift. This thesis follows the life of a black Louisville artist Joseph Seamon Cotter, Sr., who used his writing to confront minstrel tropes, establish a conception of a modern black individual, and uplift his community.

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INTRODUCTION

In the years following the Civil War, theater and literature became cultural texts in which race relations played out. White entertainers donned blackface on stage and white authors adopted Negro dialects on the page to diminish the intellect and humanity of newly-freed, black individuals, while black authors attempted to reclaim their stolen heritage through creative literature to generate racial uplift for their communities. By taking Louisville, Kentucky in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a microcosm of national race relations, one can see how minstrelsy assuaged white anxieties in the era of Jim Crow and better understand the significance of black authorship like that of Joseph Seamon Cotter, Sr. to alleviate the pervasive and detrimental aspects of minstrelsy. Cotter's work was a lifelong project of racial uplift as an educator, a community leader, and an author who worked tirelessly to confront the dominant, inaccurate representations of blackness in theatre and literature. Black artists today are still working to challenge the rampant minstrel tropes and themes that plagued this nation for over a century. In this work, I analyze Cotter's work at the cusp of a literary, artistic, and social movement for black excellence, which has recently been recognized the Long Civil Rights Movement by historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall. But even in Hall's work, she recognizes the traditional concept of the Civil Rights Movement as extending back into the 1930s which was tied to the "rise and fall of the New Deal

Order” as well as the literary movement that took shape within the Harlem Renaissance.¹ This work is an intervention to the assumption that civil rights’ activism began with Martin Luther King, Jr., or even with the literary work of Langston Hughes and James Weldon Johnson in the 1930s, but rather acknowledges the work of black activists earlier in the 20th century. This work is also an intervention in the scholarship that tends to acknowledge the black slave narrative, skips over to black authorship in the Harlem Renaissance, and leaves out the work of black authors in the time of post-Emancipation and Reconstruction America. Cotter fought for civil rights and worked toward racial uplift in the way it was taught to him by his mother, and in the only way he could find a voice in the Jim Crow South, which was through the cultural production of storytelling.

To fully understand the significance of cultural enterprise in our life and bureaucratic institutions, we must look the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures*.² Beyond the political and civic customs and functions of a society, the artistic production of an organized community, such as literature, music, and visual art, historically become known as the “culture” of that community. These artistic outputs can express the morality, beliefs, social customs, gender roles, race relations, family life, political structure, and many other important aspects of that society through their art. Geertz equates an individual’s social life to that of acting in a play and comments on the significance of culture in our lives:

Whatever else modern anthropology asserts – it is firm in the conviction that men unmodified by the customs of particular places do not in fact exist, have never existed, and most importantly, could not in the very nature of the case exist. There is, there can be, no backstage where we can go to catch

¹ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1235.

² Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures, Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books Inc., 1973).

a glimpse of Mascou's actors as "real persons" lounging about in street clothes, disengaged from their profession, displaying with artless candor their spontaneous desires and unprompted passions. They may change their roles, their styles of acting, even the dramas in which they play; but - as Shakespeare himself of course remarked - they are always performing.³

We are always performing or consciously bucking the roles outlined for us by our family, community, location, class, race, gender, and education. Human beings are not unaffected by the cultural workings happening around them, but will always alter their positions, techniques, and outward appearance in response to those customs. Rather than asserting that culture is simply the customs and traditions of a particular society, Geertz states that culture is the governing mechanism which indicates how a person is meant to behave. Ward Goodenough embellishes Geertz's postulation: "A society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members."⁴ These mechanisms are not arbitrary, but are designated by the societal members themselves, as Geertz contends: "Believing that man is an animal suspended in the webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs."⁵ However, what is important to keep in mind about this cultural web spinning, is that only the powerful have the ability to designate what is acceptable, while the marginalized communities abide by the social cultural constructs. Geertz's genius imagery of the definition of culture is exactly what is needed to begin this work on race, literature, and performance in the border city of Louisville, Kentucky.

The theoretical cultural web grows evermore entangled by the demarcation of the "modern" era in American literature that developed alongside the post-Reconstruction era

³ Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 35-36.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

of Jim Crow and the Great Migration. The thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments to the United States' Constitution granted freedom, citizenship, and equal legal protection to black Americans, however, these freedoms recoiled as white-fear and anxiety on account of their loss of racial superiority spread nationally. What started as the cultural practice of segregation quickly became codified by law with the inauguration of Rutherford B. Hayes and the 1896 Supreme Court case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which legitimized the Jim Crow Laws. These laws governed the legitimacy and spatial practices of black bodies, revoking African Americans' right to vote, mandated whom they could marry, restricted their ability to testify in court, told them where they could and could not attend school, told them where to live, and even designated white and black spaces on a bus, in the theatre, at the diner counter, the drinking fountain, swimming pools, libraries, and parks. The physical and societal separation of black and white would carry over into intellectual and cultural spaces, as well.

Famous black writers such as James Weldon Johnson, W. E. B. Du Bois, Pauline Hopkins, Fenton Johnson, and most notably Paul Laurence Dunbar began to navigate the traumatic ideological, political, economic, spatial, and cultural shift toward American modernity that also meant the shift from slavery to Jim Crow. These black writers found themselves angry and bitter in their station, and claimed that while freed from the bondage of slavery, the new Jim Crow era oppression was not something to be celebrated, and suggested that when Frederick Douglass so eloquently wrote about the "hell of slavery," he "had not known a time as 'dark' as that of a clearly triumphant Jim Crow system."⁶

⁶ James Smethurst, *The African American Roots of Modernism* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011) 2, 16.

Yet, the concept of blackness was central to American popular culture, even the “high” popular culture of the Progressive Era, in minstrel shows and minstrel-trope themes. However, these depictions of black bodies and black culture were misrepresentations. Blackface minstrelsy included traces of African American folk culture, which were lauded and popularized due to their “exotic” nature. And while these popular performances brought black folk art to mainstream popular culture, they ultimately characterized black bodies and intellect as trivialized versions of the truth for folly, sport, and profit. Blackface has been summed up by an observer as “half a century of inurement to the uses of white supremacy.”⁷

Blackface minstrelsy was created in the years of westward expansion beginning in the 1830s, but developed, evolved, and became immensely popular in the years following Emancipation in 1863. Thomas Dartmouth Rice “jumped” on stage in his blackface, ragged clothing, and contorted bodily features for the first time in 1830, over thirty years prior to the outbreak of the Civil War, and over sixty years prior to *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Rice billed himself as the first performer to don blackface in theatre, and his character “Jim Crow” quickly became a fan favorite and propelled Rice to significant fame and fortune. According to Rice, the origins of the song came from “a Kentucky corn-field Negro,” in which the music and lyrics were plausibly stolen from African Americans while cornhusking.⁸ Minstrel performance tropes, such as the “coon song,” quickly became one of the most popular forms of entertainment across the U.S. before, during, and after the Civil War. Author Eric Lott argues that “minstrelsy reveals the most popular

⁷ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 3.

⁸ Dale Cockrell, “Jim Crow, Demon of Disorder,” *American Music* 14, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 161, 171.

American entertainment form in antebellum decades as a principle site of struggle in and over the culture of the black people.”⁹ Seemingly, what the North and South tacitly agreed upon was white superiority over black intellect and productivity. Initially minstrel productions depicted a happy-go-lucky tramp and a ridiculous dandy, both of which were seemingly harmless figures. However, this naivety and innocence quickly gave way to the far more dangerous depiction of a hypersexualized, gambling, criminal, rapist, knife-toting, pistol-packing, though altogether humorous black male. This change was likely associated with emancipation, and the emergence of African Americans as perceived economic and political competitors and threats. The “coon song,” while consumed as entertainment, became an anthem for racial separation after Emancipation and Radical Reconstruction in the turn-of-the-century America. The primal, degenerate, violent, and unrepressed appetite of “blackness” confirmed any suspicion on the audience’s part of the need for Jim Crow.

White performance and consumption of blackface minstrelsy was a way to ease racial anxiety about their changing society both in the North and the South after the Civil War. Black poet and scholar Sterling Brown believed that racism apparent in minstrel performance “was a cultural industry, and falsified history a commodity,” asking “What does the mob-mind care that it is bald-face lying? The mob-mind wishes it, will have it so.”¹⁰ What the “mob-mind” wished the most at turn-of-the-century America was a picturesque landscape where black Americans were free and happy to live and work as they pleased, so long as they remained physically separate from and subservient to white

⁹ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 18.

¹⁰ David Anderson, “Sterling Brown’s Southern Strategy: Poetry as Cultural Revolution in *Southern Road*,” *Callaloo* 21, no. 4 (Fall 1998): 1032; Sterling Brown, “Weep Some More My Lady,” *Opportunity* (Spring 1932): 87.

communities. White working-class individuals felt pressure from those above them in society, but also threatened by those beneath them – black individuals, and began distorting the features and culture of African Americans to codify their own whiteness and superiority.

While based on caricatures and tropes of southern ruralness or plantation life, minstrelsy originated and thrived in the North at cultural hubs such as Cincinnati, Chicago, and New York City, quite possibly out of a longing for “simpler” times and an ill-conceived notion of southern racial harmony that never actually existed. Minstrelsy and blackface performances proved immensely popular in Louisville, and that fact, coupled with the city’s complicated political and cultural history, makes for an interesting study of race relations in a post-Civil War America. Often referred to as a “border city,” Louisville has been described as the meeting place, or middle ground between North and South.¹¹ Apart from its geographical location as a border state during the war, Louisville has a historically mixed economy, population, and regional identity that reflected those of both northern and southern traditions. After the Civil War, however, Louisville began to align itself with southern identity and racial ideology. Much of this came as a response to the Emancipation Proclamation, which many white Louisvillians saw as a betrayal to their loyalty as supporters of both the Union and the South. This feeling of betrayal coupled with the rising fear of the growing number of African Americans within the city and what their presence would mean for the economic, social, and political superiority of its white citizens, Louisville turned to the Democratic Party for protection, hosted the Southern Exposition of 1895, erected Confederate monuments, and implemented Jim

¹¹ Tracy K’Meyer, *Civil Rights in the Gateway to the South: Louisville, Kentucky 1945-1980* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 1.

Crow segregation in the city's public spaces, as well as adopting the "Day Law," a statewide law, which segregated education in Kentucky.¹²

Cultural life in Louisville reflected the switch to southern sensibilities and the increasing apprehensiveness toward the growing black population. Minstrel shows became a big hit at Macauley's Theatre, a premier theatre in Louisville throughout the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century.¹³ It initially garnered attention for its expansive design and architecture, but shortly thereafter, it increased in popularity by hosting Vaudeville productions, which were wildly popular during the decades after the Civil War. Vaudeville productions featured minstrelsy, freak shows, and burlesque, all sporting various aspects of gender, disability, and race as a spectacle. Author Stephen Johnson notes of minstrel performances, "[it was] meant to bind the audience in a position of superiority, the black body standing in for any immigrant group, women, for any "other."¹⁴ The minstrel show unified white audiences and eased their fears by securing their position over the unknown "others."

So, if minstrel performances were by and for white individuals, why do we recognize the existence of black writers, black performers, and even black consumers of minstrel entertainment? Author James Smethurst argues that black artists like Dunbar and James Weldon Johnson saw minstrelsy as an outlet for their creative works, as a way to survive as artists, and as a means to critique the political and cultural implications of Jim

¹² K'Meyer, *Civil Rights in the Gateway to the South*, 1-7.

¹³ John E. Kleber, *The Encyclopedia of Louisville* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 583.

¹⁴ Stephen Johnson, ed. *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 7.

Crow.¹⁵ However, author David Anderson adds a bit of nuance to this assertion and comments that while black artists “wielded tremendous social power during folklore performances,” they had no real economic, social, or political capital to influence the way they were represented in popular culture.¹⁶ Anderson notes that Sterling Brown condemned this exploitation of black artistry, and that African American folklore presented for the entertainment of segregated audiences, meant that the integrity of the original purpose of black folklore was lost. Brown attempted to use his poetry as a “return to the folk,” to encourage black, urban youth to “appreciate the romantic ideals expressed in slave songs, but also warning readers about the price paid by those who ignore or reject their cultural heritage.”¹⁷ In Brown’s *Southern Road*, written in 1932, he attempts to address what he recognizes as a potential loss of African American rural culture as the Great Migration led expansive black populations into the industrial North. Anderson states,

Brown especially feared the loss of folklore, which he believed helped African-American culture renew itself, not only by preserving and strengthening traditions and social practices, but also by serving as a conduit through which individuals devised and communicated new strategies for surviving racial oppression.¹⁸

Black artists like Dunbar repurposed minstrel themes and tropes such as the “Negro dialect” to reclaim their stolen folklore and to redirect detrimental minstrel culture back to black artistry.

A less well-known artist from Louisville, Joseph Cotter, spent his life’s work reclaiming dismissive minstrel concepts and instituting his own intentional, black cultural

¹⁵ Smethurst, *The African American Roots of Modernism*, 16-17.

¹⁶ Anderson, “Sterling Brown’s Southern Strategy,” 1033.

¹⁷ Ibid., 1034.

¹⁸ Anderson, “Sterling Brown’s Southern Strategy,” 1023, 1033-1034.

production to elevate himself, his community, and his community's children. Born in 1861, Cotter lived and worked in the same city at the same time minstrel performances packed audiences into at Macauley's Theatre. Cotter wrote for over 50 years and was published on both the local and national level.¹⁹ He is best remembered, however, for his teaching career, having not achieved significant notoriety as a writer. Cotter was a close friend with the famous poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, and was also deeply influenced by the work of Booker T. Washington. Yet despite a relative silence in historical literature, Cotter's work is worthy of scholarly attention, and one scholar argues that while "Dunbar perhaps, displays more of the poet's stock-in-trade, blue skies, bird-songs, brooks, roses, green grass; Cotter, we incline to think, soberer thought, deeper philosophy, and certainly a clearer spiritual insight."²⁰ Cotter's spiritual, philosophical, and self-reflective prose is what drew me to his work, and why I here analyze his life and work. Cotter wrote many poems that commented on racial injustice and on the outcome and aftermath of the Civil War, including "Lincoln and Davis," "The Nation's Neglected Child," and "Grant and Lee."²¹ Like Booker T. Washington, Dunbar, Du Bois, and many others, Cotter saw his work as an educator, a writer, and as a member of both the black community of his city and the larger community of Louisville. Cotter directed his efforts as a part of a social mission: to create and develop an authentic black voice in a white space, as well as to guide black individuals into their own through his educational career. In exploring

¹⁹ Ann Allen Shockley, "Joseph S. Cotter Sr.: Biographical Sketch of a Black Louisville Bard," *College Language Association Journal* 18, no. 3 (March 1975): 327-329.

²⁰ Charles J. O'Malley, a Kentucky poet and critic, cited by John Wilson Townsend in "Kentucky's Dunbar: Joseph Seamon Cotter," in *Lore of the Meadowland* (Lexington: J. L. Richardson, 1911) 26.

²¹ Joseph Seamon Cotter, Sr., *A White Song and A Black One* (Louisville: The Bradley and Gilbert Company, 1909).

Cotter's creative and educational endeavors, I argue that it reveals how black artists shaped their artistic voice amidst pervasive minstrelsy in America, what tactics they employed to reclaim their stolen folklore, how Joseph Cotter's life and work stand in as evidence of the black experience in the context of the time and place in which he lived, and how he worked to improve that experience.

The first chapter explores the ways in which minstrelsy developed throughout the years of westward expansion in the 1830s, as white actors saw African American culture as something easily replicated, and easily brought them fame and fortune from the initial popularity of the craft. Post-Emancipation, the themes within the minstrel show became much darker and painted newly-freed black individuals as thieving, conniving, and sexual predators, which perpetuated false stereotypes which established the need for Jim Crow Segregation. The final portion of the chapter explores the popularity of minstrelsy in the city of Louisville at Macauley's Theatre, and how its popularity points to the notions of racial anxiety and white supremacy in the city.

The second chapter traces the life and work of Joseph Seamon Cotter from an early age when he was forced to give up his education in order to work to provide for his family, his eventual education in night school, his career as educator, his fatherhood, and his work in his community. The chapter is focused around his literature and argues that his writing is best understood as a project that sought to overcome stereotypes, break down barriers, and create unity and hope as a path towards racial uplift.

Furthermore, this work will conclude with the lasting implications of minstrel forms and the refashioning of those forms on today's cultural, political, and social concepts of race.

CHAPTER I: MINSTRELSY IN THE BORDER CITY

Previous scholars have sorely underestimated the power of cultural expressions as agents of social change or regression. We look to the protests, marches, sit-ins of social activists, the acts, laws, and decrees of political leadership, and even physical battle and war to understand the ways society has changed overtime. With Clifford Geertz's concept of culture as a basis, I attempt to analyze the cultural expressions of nineteenth and twentieth century theater as a significant reflection of race relations. Specifically, I trace how these racial negotiations played out on stage in the border city of Louisville, a city that imagined itself as racially progressive throughout the height of minstrel America. I argue that the analysis of these cultural expressions of theatre will point to the broader implications of racial anxiety, white superiority, black oppression, and the negotiations of blackness in post-Emancipation America.

One of the more instructive forms of theater that revealed larger anxieties and negotiations about race was the evolution of the figure of Jim Crow and the invention of blackface minstrelsy. The popularity of the caricature indeed brought immense fame to its creator Thomas Dartmouth Rice; however, the creativity behind the character was not a product of Rice's genius. Rice was born into poverty in New York City, yet he learned a trade and garnered some respectability for himself by the age of twenty. However, he soon left the life of a craftsman to join the life of theatre on the western theatre circuit, which was, at the time, the "western frontier," the now mid-western/southern states of

Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, and Tennessee.²² Through an analysis of the lyrics, the character of Jim Crow appears to be a child of the west – brazen bravado, able to out-fight, out-eat, out-lie, out-dance, out-swear, and out-sex anyone.²³ The frontiersman Jim Crow, born from disorder and daring, appealed to the urban, eastern, common man. Jim Crow’s fans, therefore, Rice’s fans were politically inclined, Democrats, and supporters of Andrew Jackson. Nineteenth-century New England found itself the breeding ground for “callithumpians,” a social ritual that was an Americanized version of the European charivari, which were mob demonstrations used to hang individuals in effigy, usually led by white, middle-class men, and upon the advent of T.D. Rice’s song and dance, Jim Crow became an active participant in these “misrule” festivals.²⁴

Aside from the class-based origins, the Jim Crow trope was also deeply rooted in the African American tradition. During Rice’s lifetime, plantation slavery held its own traditions of misrule. Cornhusking and cakewalks were rituals in which groups of slaves would compete for the affection of the master, which would maybe result in favorable, or less-harsh treatment, and the winner would then be rewarded with a prize. In the case of cornhusking, the winners, who shucked the most ears of corn in the shortest amount of time were rewarded with a feast, and for cakewalks, the winner of the dance competition was rewarded with a cake. Cakewalks were also a form of carnival, where African Americans could make fun of those higher than them on the social ladder without their white audiences knowing. So, the cakewalk could be used as a source of performative stereotyping, but also had alternative uses and meanings for the African American

²² Cockrell, “Jim Crow, Demon of Disorder,” 166-167.

²³ *Ibid.*, 167.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 166-168.

community. This ritual has even older origins in the trope of the “black comic fool,” which would have originated in the early European colonization of Africa and the slave trade.²⁵ Some scholars have argued these stereotypes functioned to distract from the brutality of slavery, “that the slave entertains the master by acting ridiculous, and thus appears happier than his condition warrants – is intrinsic to the master-slave relationship. It can be observed wherever slaves – or even servants have existed.”²⁶ Rice, as an entertainer and as a resident of the South, would have been aware of these African American traditions brought about by slavery, and this culture was easily extractible and replicated. Beyond the comic fool trope, the content imbedded into the original “Jim Crow” verses were entirely reminiscent of slave tales and slave lore (See Fig. 1).²⁷

²⁵ Yuval Taylor and Jake Austen, *Darkest America: Black Minstrelsy from Slavery to Hip-Hop* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012) 30.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Eric Lott, *Love and Theft*, 22.



Figure 1. Cover to Early Edition Jump Jim Crow Sheet Music
Courtesy of Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities at the University of Virginia

Entertainers witnessed how easily extractable black culture was in Rice's Jim Crow, and they also noticed the popularity his character, and therefore how wealthy he became. As Eric Lott eloquently stated, "Cultural expropriation is the minstrel show's central fact, and we should not lose sight of that,"²⁸ underscoring that white producers were profiting from black culture financially while the audience was profiting from a cultural commerce. Author James Hatch argues that through appropriation "White playwrights appropriated theatrical gestures from Negro culture, but rarely detected the meaning and the soul behind the gesture. The racism that made them feel superior, also made them blind."²⁹ Minstrelization was both a socially accepted form of racial control, yet continually acknowledged and absorbed black culture even while defending white America against it.³⁰

Early in the nineteenth century, as minstrelsy was beginning to develop, white audiences believed the counterfeit – believed that these white individuals in blackface were representing the real thing. Mark Twain himself commented that he enjoyed the "happy and accurate" representations of slave life within the minstrel tradition.³¹ In the 1930s, black poet Sterling Brown responded to this, wryly reflecting that:

America, since [Stephen] Foster, has been set clamoring for idyllic content beneath Carolina skies, in the sleepy hills of Tennessee, where one may tuck oneself to sleep in his old Tucky home while the Mississippi—that lazy river—rolls on and Dandy Jim strums chords to Lucinda in the canebrake.³²

²⁸ Ibid., 19.

²⁹ James V. Hatch, "Introduction," in *Lost Plays of the Harlem Renaissance, 1920-1940*, ed. James V. Hatch and Leo Hamalian (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 13.

³⁰ Ibid., 40.

³¹ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 20.

³² Sterling Brown, "Weep Some More My Lady," in *Opportunity* (Spring 1932): 87.

What Brown is pointing to here is that both pre-Emancipation and post-slavery America was creating a rural nostalgia; attempting to create a time that never existed, a time in which the slave happily toiled in the field, was treated fairly by his kindly master, and the South became this scene in which racial harmony existed in the master/slave relationship, which was then turned to upheaval at the close of the Civil War. The blackface minstrels simply became “Negroes” and were tirelessly referred to as “amusing darkies.”³³ A white Union soldier once retorted that two black soldiers in his barracks “look[ed] exactly like our minstrels.”³⁴ The blurring of the apparent contrast between white performers in blackface and actual black people became so degraded that sheet music and playbills started portraying blackface performers both in and out of costume to quell the confusion (see Fig. 2).³⁵

³³ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 20.

³⁴ Ibid.



Figure 2. Songs of the Virginia Serenaders, 1844
 Courtesy of the Boston Public Library Music Special Collection

The shape of the minstrel show itself evolved over time, from precious and romanticized depictions of slave life with the original characters Jim Crow and Zip Coon to eventually introducing much darker characters who were thieving, devious, and sexually promiscuous. Blackface characters would initially occupy one portion of a show, or as a character that fulfilled the role of comic relief, but at its height in the years following the Civil War it was a configuration of four to five white (almost always) male performers blackened with a burnt cork or grease paint, and alternating between plantation rustic in baggy or ragged Negro clothing and urban dandies in formal evening wear. They utilized an array of instruments typically attributed to black culture, most prominently the banjo, the fiddle, and the tambourine. The first part of the show offered a random selection of songs which passed for “black wit” or more accurately “jester”; the second part featured novelty performances such as comic dialogues, ridiculous “stump speeches,” as well as cross-dressing; the third act was typically comprised of narrative skit, usually set in the South, exhibiting dancing, music, and burlesque.³⁶

Jim Crow functioned as a song, dance, and performance about racial inferiority, born out of the years of westward expansion, Jacksonian democracy, and pre-Emancipation Proclamation America. During this time, white middle-class Americans were already beginning to see a shift in their status-quo. Northern states offered freedom from slavery for African Americans in the early nineteenth century, and white middle-class populations became uneasy with their changing world in terms of race, class, and territorial expansion. And while Thomas Dartmouth Rice himself never performed in an “official” minstrel performance, the monster he created would grace stages and

³⁶ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 4-6.; Johnson, *Burnt Cork*, 7.

perpetuate detrimental black stereotypes in America for the next century and would become the most popular version of entertainment of the Gilded Age, the Progressive Era, and beyond.

With the invention of the steamboat and the expanse of the Louisville and Tennessee railroads, Louisville became an important hub for trade of both goods from the Cotton Kingdom in the Deep South and the international slave trade from North to South. This import hub on the river brought many migrants into the city, both white and black, yet the latter were usually bound in slavery. Free black Louisvillians Washington Spradling, Sr. and Shelton Morris established the first African American residential community in the city in the 1830s, which indeed made the white population uneasy. A newspaper editorial from 1835 entitled “Local Evils” echoes this anxiety:

We are overrun with free negroes. In certain parts of our town throngs of them may be seen at any time – and most of them have no ostensible means at earning a living. They lounge about through the day, and most subsist by stealing, or receiving stolen articles from slaves at night. [...] Their impudence naturally attracts the attention of slaves, and necessarily becomes contagious. In addition to this, free negroes are teaching night schools. Slaves are their pupils and, in most instances, to rob their masters or employers...³⁷

Yet by the end of Reconstruction Louisville cultivated a reputation as a place of “racial moderation,” meaning the attitudes of white individuals toward the black population of the city were comparatively benevolent to other cities in the south. As *Louisville Courier-Journal* and *Louisville Times* long-time general manager, Mark Ethridge summarized, “I believe the Negro gets a better break in Louisville than in any southern city.”³⁸ But, as authors Mervin Aubespain, Kenneth Clay, and Blaine Hudson made explicitly clear, while

³⁷ “Local Evils,” *Louisville Public Advertiser*, November 30, 1835.

³⁸ K’Meyer, *Civil Rights in the Gateway to the South*, 1.

this notion is not necessarily false, it incorrectly attributes these black communities' achievements to the "charity" of white people. Aubespín, Clay, and Hudson state,

Although there would be an occasional white radical, the paternalism of most white friends of the local black community was reminiscent of the myth of the "kindly master" of antebellum days. Of course, the counterpart of this myth is the stereotype of the mindless but faithful "slave" who could do nothing on his or her own – without guidance from and regulation by whites.³⁹

The mindless and faithful slave narrative was perpetuated by minstrel tropes and set their audiences at ease by securing that myth in theatrical elements. Author George Wright breaks down this myth further by stating that the upper-class white community of Louisville only supported particular aspects of the black community in order to maintain racial order in the city. In return for their support, white Louisvillians expected passivism and obedience from the black community, an expectation that served to keep black citizens under their control.⁴⁰ This paternalistic view of race relations in Louisville parallels the role of Jim Crow and black face minstrelsy as another form of maintaining white supremacy. This paternalism across the city accounts for the popularity of minstrel performances in Louisville, many of which took place at the acclaimed Macauley's Theatre, located on Walnut Street in downtown Louisville.

Bernard "Barney" Macauley, the founder of Macauley's, dedicated his life to the theatre years before his establishment of the premier Louisville venue. His life and career appear remarkably similar to those of Thomas Dartmouth Rice. He was born in New

³⁹ Mervin Aubespín, Kenneth Clay, J. Blaine Hudson, *Two Centuries of Black Louisville: A Photographic History* (Louisville: Butler Books, 2011), 39.

⁴⁰ George C. Wright, *Life Behind a Veil: Blacks in Louisville Kentucky, 1865-1930* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 2.

York in 1837 to an Irish-born carpenter. Barney himself trained to be a bookbinder but developed a lung disorder that ended his career. Due to his health conditions, Macauley decided to pursue a passion outside of his learned trade – acting. He began his professional career in Buffalo, New York, but found himself enthralled by the southern circuit and then headlined at the Memphis Theatre in Tennessee in the 1850s. Upon the outbreak of the Civil War, The Memphis Theatre closed and Macauley moved his family to Indianapolis where Barney and his brother John managed a theatre throughout the war. During Reconstruction, Macauley left Indianapolis and moved to Louisville to work as a stock actor at the Old Louisville Theatre. He also often starred in performances at the Louisville Opera House, eventually taking a management role at the Lexington Opera House, and in the mid-1860s, Macauley was successful managing and performing in the Cincinnati theatre scene, where he made a small fortune for himself and then returned to Louisville.⁴¹

Macauley built his impressive theatre on a picturesque piece of a residential district in downtown Louisville near the corner of Fourth and Walnut Streets known as Old Prather Square. Barney held his opening night on October 4th, 1873. Newspapers across the city hailed the new theatre's architecture as rivaled only by the great playhouses of New York City. The *Courier-Journal* recounts the splendor,

It was a glistening crowd that saw for the first time the forty feet of stage flare with its fabulous food lights, worked by a valve; the ornamented wainscot four feet high, the frescoed ceiling by F. Pedretti of Cincinnati. A yard-long handbill resplendent of the flag of a Bolshevik Nation announced the opening night of one of the most substantial and elegant theatres in the world, giving due recognition to carpenters, painters, plasterers, and other artisans as well as to the star and cast. [...] In one of the boxes sat Mr.

⁴¹ West T. Hill, "A Study of Macauley's Theatre in Louisville, Kentucky, 1873-1880," (Ph.D diss., State University of Iowa, 1954), 1-2, 4-8.

Macauley himself. The other three were agleam with dove colored silks, sprinkled with the few lemon-striped taffetas.⁴²

But, among all this finery, dwelled something dark, born from the middle-class rabble of T.D. Rice and the gang: Macauley's stage regularly brought blackface minstrelsy to Louisville's audiences.

This "high" theatre with its world-renowned architecture produced blackface minstrel productions throughout its seasons from the late nineteenth century throughout the better part of the first twenty years of the 1900s. The first documented minstrel performance staged here was not recorded until the year 1879, but minstrelsy was alive and well in Louisville during the opening month of Macauley's in 1873. Near the end of October of that year, in which Macauley's hosted its opening night earlier that month, the *Courier-Journal* published an article on a performance by Rachel Macauley, the actress-wife of Barney. Directly beneath the review of her performance in the paper, resides an article announcing the staging of "The Georgia Minstrels," at playhouse "Library Hall" throughout the week.⁴³ In 1878, Macauley's Theatre hosted the stage production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which was written as an abolitionist novel, but in the stage production used white actors in blackface to portray the characters. In 1879, Macauley's hosted Haverly's Colored Minstrels, a production that foregrounded blackface and cemented the theatrical practice in this theatre.⁴⁴

J.H. Haverly, a frequent performer at Macauley's, was one of the most insidious minstrel troupe leaders and borrowed techniques from famous comen such as P.T.

⁴² *The Courier-Journal*, December 14, 1925, pg. 12A.

⁴³ "Macauley's Theatre," *Courier-Journal*, October 22, 1873.

⁴⁴ Weisert, *Last Night at Macauley's*, 19.

Barnum. He combined his four independent minstrel troupes into one large troupe dubbed “Haverly’s United Mastodon Minstrels” touting upwards of forty members. He continued to purchase minstrel groups, absorbing them into the Mastodons – his troupe at one point had over one-hundred members. In 1878, at the height of the Mastodons, Haverly entered the market of black minstrelsy, purchasing the “Original Georgia Minstrels” from Charles Callender and renamed them “Haverly’s Colored Minstrels.” He used many of the same techniques as with the Mastodons and also purchased other African American minstrel groups to increase their size. Haverly was notorious for spreading and attempting to reinforce the idea that minstrelsy was a true depiction of African American life, and almost always implemented plantation themes within his performances. He even went so far as to create a mock plantation in a Boston field with over a hundred black actors in costume, including “overseers, bloodhounds and darkies at work ... indulging in songs, dances [and] antics peculiar to their people” (See Fig. 3).⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying the Underground Tradition of African American Humor that Transformed American Culture, From Slavery to Richard Pryor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 97-99.



Figure 3. Haverly's European Mastodon Minstrels
Courtesy of the National Museum of American History

As Macauley's cemented its role in the Louisville theater scene in the years

following, minstrel troupes found themselves a Louisville home at Macauley's instead of elsewhere throughout the city. The minstrel shows hosted by Macauley's drew rave reviews from the journalists at the *Courier-Journal* and from the audiences themselves. The reviews described a full-house, sold-out shows, and the audience as "laughing and applauding for nearly three hours."⁴⁶ The minstrel performances played a central role at Macauley's due to the fact they often opened and closed each season with headlining minstrel shows. Opening night of the 1899 season was ushered in by Al Field and his company of minstrels to "furnish an evening of mirth and songs."⁴⁷ Interestingly enough,

⁴⁶ "Amusements: Macauley's Theatre," *Courier-Journal*, March 31, 1885

⁴⁷ "At the Theatres: New Season Ushered In At Macauley's," *Courier-Journal*, September 12, 1899.

the article stated, “There are also a great many people who never see the inside of a playhouse except when the minstrels come,”⁴⁸ an observation that reflects the centrality of minstrel performance to theater in the city. The demand for minstrel performance carried well into the twentieth century at Macauley’s. On opening night in 1913 Macauley’s rang in its 41st season with a minstrel performance. Additionally, this now “old theatre” got an upgrade for the occasion, including a new steam heater to replace the furnaces, new doors between the lobby and the auditorium, the removal of some seats to provide ample leg room and peak comfortability, as well as a fresh coat of paint and new décor.⁴⁹

While the Jim Crow character and blackface minstrelsy was something born out of misrule, it became the standard of popular entertainment across America for people of all classes and occupations, and Louisville was no exception. The 1902 season’s opening minstrel show hosted a sold-out audience with standing room only:

There were chairs in the aisles and rows of people standing up back of the seats, but all of the audience probably not one went away dissatisfied. It was a distinctly minstrel crowd that took in all ages, sizes, and conditions of life. There were lawyers, doctors, business men [sic.], politicians and simply society folk, all thoroughly enjoying themselves, for in Field’s [the minstrel troupe leader] hodge-podge there seemed to be something for everyone. Each class drew a prize.⁵⁰

The popularity of blackface performances reveals the importance of reinscribing racial hierarchy in popular culture; the one thing that unified these groups of people was the delineation between “us” and “them.” Each of these individuals, regardless of gender,

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ “Birthday Dress: Macauley’s Theatre Decked for Forty-first Opening,” *Courier-Journal*, August 31, 1913.

⁵⁰ “At the Theatres: Macauley’s Theatre Opens With Al Field’s Minstrels,” *Courier-Journal*, September 11, 1902.

social class, occupation, or age sought out the minstrel show for its denigration of blackness. Blackface reinforced the centrality of whiteness and demarcated black Americans as “the other.” This very visual and physical delineation – the burnt cork, black face, the contorted body, the degenerate speech – thus produced the racial distinction and clearly outlined the power differential between the binaristic categories.

Many of the minstrel performances and actors of Macauley’s Theatre were documented in photography, where the baseness, insensitivity, and degradation is apparent in images where words lack (See Fig. 4-6).



Photographic Archives, Ekstrom Library, University of Louisville

Figure 4. George W. Wilson, 1888-1891

Courtesy of The University of Louisville Photographic Archives, Macauley’s Theatre Collection



Photographic Archives, Ekstrom Library, University of Louisville

Figure 5. Paul Allen, Mayor of the Ohio River "Yea Boe Roe"
Courtesy of The University of Louisville Photographic Archives, Macauley's Theatre Collection



Photographic Archives, Ekstrom Library, University of Louisville

Figure 6. Scene from a minstrel show at Macauley's Theatre, date unknown
Courtesy of The University of Louisville Photographic Archives, Macauley's Theatre Collection

Scholars have come to understand the popularity of blackface minstrelsy as a platform to establish white superiority, and as a place to be entertained by your greatest fears. To again call upon Lott's expertly written summary of blackface minstrelsy,

Minstrel performers often attempted to repress through ridicule the real interest in black cultural practices they nonetheless betrayed – minstrelsy's mixed erotic economy of celebration and exploitation. [...] Blackface minstrelsy [was] less a sign of absolute white power and control than panic, anxiety, terror, and pleasure.⁵¹

On the absurdity of minstrelsy, author Stephen Johnson notes, "The fact that a group of men in blackface could carry a full evening's entertainment on their own, without benefit of alternative plot or variety, was a surprise."⁵² One would think that this type of entertainment would thrive in underground, distasteful productions, and would die out after a few years, but the elements of both complete enamor and racial superiority, what Lott describes as "Love and Theft" imbedded within the minstrel show, was indicative of what Americans only dimly realized they felt, let alone understood.⁵³ The evolution of minstrelsy overtime brought the performance out of middle-class mayhem in which it began, and onto the high-class stages like Macauley's Theatre.

The geographical location and cultural perspective of the city of Louisville at the height of minstrelsy sets up an interesting study of the relationship between white racial ideology and the consumption of blackface entertainment. Just as Louisville rejected secession from the Union prior to the war and aided the Union army during the war, it also embraced southern ideals and culture and adopted Jim Crow in the years following Emancipation. At the same time, two of the most prominent anti-slavery literary works

⁵¹ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 6.

⁵² Johnson, *Burnt Cork*, 7.

⁵³ Lott, *Love and Theft*.

were adopted by white supremacy and used as racist rhetoric in the years of Reconstruction. Like minstrel tropes, both *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Huckleberry Finn* belittled their black characters into naivety, obedience, and child-like helplessness, and while these attributes were proven powerful as anti-slavery rhetoric, they would prove even more powerful as continued minstrel tropes to keep black individuals inferior. Louisville's paternalism in racial politics and the minstrelsy at Macauley's heavily influenced each other, and simultaneously deflected and deterred black contributions, advancement, and success within the city.

CHAPTER II: A WHITE SONG AND A BLACK ONE IN LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

Joseph Seamon Cotter, Sr. was an agent of social change through his career as an educator, as a community leader, and as a writer. Situated at the height of minstrel entertainment, his writings, while often ignored in the biographical scholarship written of Cotter, were a part of a larger social movement for black excellence despite rampant blackface and minstrel artistic forms. Eugene Redmond described Cotter as “among the first black poets to represent without shame and minstrelsy, authentic black folk life.”⁵⁴ To introduce Cotter’s views on the black experience of his time, an analysis one of Cotter’s poems, “The Nation’s Neglected Child” is needed. The first stanza of the poem reads:

I am not thy pampered steed.
I am not thy welcome dog.
I am of a lower breed.
Even than thy Berkshire hog.
I am thy neglected child.
Make me grow, but keep me wild.⁵⁵

Cotter’s words here reflect the way enslaved individuals were viewed as property, as they were sold in markets, whipped and beaten, and listed in wills or asset catalogs alongside furniture, animals, and other assorted property. Cotter positions himself as of a “lower breed” to even that of a hog, which is often considered the lowliest of creatures. But we

⁵⁴ Eugene B. Redmond, *Drumvoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry* (New York: Anchor Books, 1976), 105.

⁵⁵ Joseph Seamon Cotter, Sr., “The Nation’s Neglected Child,” Box “Lou C. 5. 4,” Cotter Papers, Western Branch, Louisville, Kentucky.

know that Cotter wrote in post-Emancipation America, so he is not only referring to antebellum enslavement. He is referring to his life in the Jim Crow era when, after slavery, white America grappled with recently emancipated black populations and the shame of slavery. Turning then to America's unknown future, Cotter laments the questions that remain at hand for the nation's race relations, and how he believes resolution will be achieved in his final two stanzas of "The Nation's Neglected Child."

Man must do the work of men
In tomorrow's hurried race.
Will our Nation knuckle then?
Will she fear the victor's pace?
Let her see what virtue lies
In her teacher's prophesies.

Blood will find the breed of blood.
Art will prove the worth of worth.
Knowledge yields in flower and bud.
Love will stay the crumbling earth.
These are but the streams that roll
From a trained and trustful soul.⁵⁶

Cotter's query about America's "fear [of] the victor's pace" invokes the white population's anxiety of the growing black populations, a fear both in numbers as well as intellectual, economic, and political success. The last stanza sums up Cotter's entire world-view and purpose for his work, and furthermore, establishes his vision of success for black Americans. He is stating that art proves a person's, a community's, or even a race's worth; artistic outputs equate to worth, respect, and recognition. Beyond creativity, Cotter states that one must also possess knowledge and love, qualities that Cotter possessed as he strove to educate and uplift Louisville's black community. The last line, "a trained and trustful soul," reflects Cotter's mission and his legacy as someone who

⁵⁶ Ibid.

strove to create a black identity and a respectable black voice in a white world (See Fig. 7 for a portrait of Cotter).



Figure 7. Joseph Seamon Cotter, Sr.
Courtesy of the African American Registry

The written accounts about Joseph Seamon Cotter, Sr., his life, and his work are very limited and hardly attempt to analyze his poetry and plays. Most of the secondary sources written about Cotter are biographical in nature or are very short entries in anthologies and encyclopedias that merely reference him and his work.⁵⁷ Ann Allen Shockley's "Biographical Sketch of a Black Louisville Bard,"⁵⁸ from 1975, argues that he

⁵⁷ Russell A. Brooks, "Joseph Seamon Cotter Sr.," *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 50: 62–70.; Robert T. Kerlin, "A Poet from Bardstown," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 20 (July 1921): 213–221.; Eugene B. Redmond, *Drumvoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry* (New York: Anchor Books, 1976).; John Wilson Townsend, "Kentucky's Dunbar: Joseph Seamon Cotter" In *Lore of the Meadowland*, 23–26. (Lexington: J.L. Richardson, 1911).

⁵⁸ Shockley, "Joseph S. Cotter, Sr."

is not remembered by his community as a writer, but as an educator, and so her work creates a portrait of Cotter from his family history, to his educational career, and to his contributions to the Louisville community, but does not spend a significant amount of time on Cotter's creative output. Shockley is correct in her interpretation, as Cotter's contributions to the black Louisville community lie heavily in the education realm, as he spent much of his time as a teacher, mentor, administrator, principal, and community educator. Yet still, his creativity was also a central part of his sense of self and legacy, and as such we must recognize the significance of his writing to his underlying mission. His social commentary, especially that on race relations, as well as using his writing as parallelism to reclaim black folk culture cannot be overlooked, yet, have been since his death in 1949. Alternatively, instead of negotiating between which parts of Cotter's life were more memorable, or rather worth remembering, I argue that his life's work as an educator, as a community member, mentor, and leader, as well as his creative outputs in his poems, songs, and plays all contributed to a greater mission -- a mission of civil rights, social justice, and community uplift. This mission served also to confront white artistic portrayals of blackface in minstrel forms, which as a black artist, Cotter believed to be detrimental to his community and set about reclaiming and negotiating those forms in his artistry.

To fully understand Cotter's social and artistic work, it is necessary to understand his family's history and upbringing and how they influenced his life and career. Cotter's mother, Martha Vaughn, was the daughter of a black slave and a half-white and half-Cherokee Indian, and was described by her son Joseph in the following paragraph,

My mother's hair was long, black, soft and wavy, her forehead was high and receding, her nose was long and straight, her chin was nearly square, her

mouth was that of the typical talker and her color and cheekbones were those of the Indian. [...] Her voice was clear, musical and full of fire. To hear her talk was to re-member forever. Many people who knew her claimed that in brain and soul-power she was my superior.⁵⁹

Vaughn's father, Fleming Vaughn, was the son of an English slave master and a Cherokee Indian, and was born enslaved by his own father, but was eventually freed by the same hand. Vaughn's mother, a black slave named Lucinda was freed by her father, who purchased his own freedom and the freedom of his children. Lucinda and Fleming Vaughn purchased a 39-acre farm in Nelson County, Kentucky shortly after their marriage, and named it, Flem Hollow. Due to financial troubles, Fleming sold seven of his children, including Martha into bond slavery in the year 1853. At the age of 13 Martha was sold to a sheriff in Bardstown, Kentucky, located approximately thirty miles outside of Louisville. A year later, Vaughn was transferred from the sheriff to work for the Rowan family of the Federal Hill Plantation, which is now acclaimed as My Old Kentucky Home State Park where Stephen Collins Foster purportedly discovered the inspiration for his wildly famous and hotly contested song of the same name. Here, Vaughn made less than four dollars a month milking the cows, cutting the wood, cooking every meal for the family, and even nursing the Rowan's twin daughters May and Maud. Upwards of forty slaves toiled in the sleepy hills of the now "Bourbon Capital of the World" at the Bardstown plantation. Vaughn worked as a bond slave for various families in and around the cities of Bardstown and Louisville, and eventually settled for a time with the Cotter family of Louisville, where she worked as a nurse. Out of fear his daughter might be sold fully into slavery in the South, Vaughn's father Fleming drafted

⁵⁹ Joseph S. Cotter, untitled autobiography, Chapter 5, "Lucinda Vaughn," Cotter Papers, Louisville Free Public Library, Western Branch.

her free papers in the fall of 1859, although she continued to work for the Cotter family in the following years. Two years after gaining her freedom, she bore her son Joseph Cotter, the product of the sexual relationship between Vaughn and her previous owner and current boss, 60-year-old, Scotch-Irish immigrant Micheil Cotter.⁶⁰

Cotter's love of learning and his passion for social justice was passed down to him from his mother. Vaughn left the Cotter household two years after the Civil War, where she went to live and work with a black woman named Ann Davis. In the year 1830, Davis began a society that served Louisville's black community in caring for the sick, burying the dead, and even protected free people of color from being sold into slavery in the city. In 1848, the society officially became the "Sons and Daughters of the Morning," which remained a benevolent working society in the city for many years even after Emancipation. Davis' spirit wore off on Vaughn, and even though she did not work as community activist like Davis, she did defend her life and livelihood as a working black woman by fighting off white attackers and demanding appropriate compensation for her labor from white employers. Cotter remembered his mother washing for white men who were visiting the city on business or otherwise and staying in hotels. Vaughn would do the washing, and have Cotter return the clothes to the men. When the men refused to pay young Cotter, Vaughn would stash a long necked black bottle under her shawl, drag her son with her to the hotel room, and demand her proper payment. Cotter recalled that she received her payment every time. By not deferring to white men on

⁶⁰ Cotter, autobiography, Chapter 6, "Martha, My Mother."; Shockley, "Joseph S. Cotter, Sr." 329-330.

individual bases, or the white community of Louisville at large, Vaughn set an example for her son to speak up against injustice, and to fight back when necessary.⁶¹

Cotter's formal education was scant, but his career was extensive and his impact and legacy were significant. As a son of a recently freed woman, Cotter was born into poverty and attended school only until the age of eight, when he was forced to drop out to help support his family. His early learning came to him in the songs and stories of his mother, and Cotter attributed his intellectual talents to his mother, who taught herself to read, as well as composed her own stories, plays, and songs. Throughout his childhood, teenage years, and into young adulthood, Cotter worked as a manual laborer, first in a brickyard, as a bourbon distiller, and eventually as a teamster. At the age of twenty-two, he entered night school at the prodding of black Louisville educator Dr. William T. Peyton. This meeting left a mark on Cotter, who later said that it was Peyton who initially discovered his skills as a writer and was influential in Cotter's decision to become a teacher. After ten short months in night school, where Cotter began in the "primary" department due to his lack of prior education, Cotter launched his teaching career, where he would devote his entire working life until his retirement in 1942. Cotter served on the faculty of Western Colored School, became the principal of a school named for his contemporary and friend, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and finally became principle of the Samuel L. Coleridge-Taylor School in 1911, where he remained for the following 31 years until his retirement.⁶² In 1956, less than ten years after his death, an elementary

⁶¹ Cotter, autobiography, Chapter 6 and 13.

⁶² Cotter, autobiography, Chapters 26-30.; Shockley, "Joseph S. Cotter, Sr.," 331-332; J. Blaine Hudson, "Joseph Seamon Cotter," in *The Kentucky African American Encyclopedia*, ed. Gerald L. Smith, Karen Cotton McDaniel, John A. Hardin (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2015).

school in the Jefferson County Public School system was named in Cotter's honor as "Joseph S. Cotter Elementary." The pamphlet for the dedication ceremony reflected that "Mr. Cotter was always one to give of himself, both physically and financially. His life was one of paternal protection and love for every child who came under his tutelage."⁶³ Lucian V. Rule of the *Louisville Times* offered that "Mr. Cotter is a sort of St. Joseph in his gently, profound shepherding of all children and youth."⁶⁴ The dedication concludes, "Our elementary school has truly chosen the name of a great American."⁶⁵ The school eventually closed in the early 1990s, and a housing project was built in his honor named "Cotter Homes Housing Project."⁶⁶

Cotter dedicated his life to the next generation of black citizens, both his own biological children as well as the children of his community. For Cotter, "the child is the only force that raises, or lowers a community."⁶⁷ Cotter was father to three children, three of which would die at a young age. His first child died in infancy, and their second child Florence Olivia was born in 1893, but died in the year following her college graduation of tuberculosis. Cotter's son, Joseph Seamon Cotter, Jr. was born in 1895. Cotter, Jr. followed in his father's footsteps in his love of learning, prolific writing, and was known as one of the early harbingers of the Harlem Renaissance but also died prematurely due to tuberculosis.⁶⁸ Cotter, Jr., like his sister (Florence Olivia taught her younger brother,

⁶³ Program of Dedication for the Joseph S. Cotter Elementary and the Lucie N. DuValle Junior High School, November 13, 1956, Cotter Papers, Louisville Free Public Library, Western Branch.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Cynthia Wilson, "Nuggets from Parkland's past sparkle in book by native," *Courier-Journal*, January 16, 1991.; "Cornerstones of Black History," *Courier-Journal*, February 20, 1991.

⁶⁷ Shockley, "Joseph S. Cotter, Sr." 332.

⁶⁸ Cotter, "Joseph Seamon Cotter, Jr.," Box, "Lou C. 6.," Cotter Papers, Western Branch, Louisville, Kentucky.

Joseph to read), graduated from Central High school in 1911, where he gave the salutatorian address and read his Commencement Thesis, entitled “Back to Nature,” where he calls out the unnatural and cruel dwellings of urban life, particularly those of the lower class, and therefore those of the African American population:⁶⁹

In a four-story house of about forty rooms one may possibly find fifty families with at least as many as four members each, crowded into this space. They have poor or no ventilation at all, they live in filth and dirt of months of accumulation and the result is a weakly consumptive lot of people. They are crowded together into one room; therefore, they cannot learn self-respect.⁷⁰

This recognition of racial oppression by sixteen-year-old Cotter, Jr. reveals that societal awareness and racial uplift was a Cotter family affair and must have been imbedded in the Cotter children from Cotter, Sr., Maria Cox, and Martha Vaughn. Cotter, Jr. was also a playwright and wrote *On the Fields of France* in the year 1920, which takes place on a battlefield in Northern France during World War I. Cotter Jr. never saw the war himself, but a close friend, Abram Simpson, became the youngest black army captain during the war, and Simpson’s war stories provided Cotter, Jr. the inspiration for his play. The two-actor cast is made up of a white American officer and a black American officer who are dying together on the battlefield. The black officer proclaims that it is not so hard to die when one is dying for liberty. The white officer responds, “Do you feel that way too? I’ve often wondered how your people felt. We’ve treated you so bally [sic.] mean over home [...] I’ve been as guilty as the rest.”⁷¹ The two slowly start to slip into

⁶⁹ “Colored Graduates Are Given Their Diplomas,” *Courier-Journal*, June 24, 1911.

⁷⁰ Joseph Seamon Cotter, Jr., “Back to Nature,” Commencement Thesis, Box “Lou C. 6.,” Cotter Papers, Western Branch, Louisville Free Public Library, Louisville, Kentucky.

⁷¹ Joseph Seamon Cotter, Jr., “On the Fields of France,” originally published in *The Crisis*, June 1920. *The Crisis* is the official magazine of the NAACP. Its founding editor was W. E. B. Du Bois in 1910 and it is still in-print today. It is the oldest black publication in the world. Du Bois wrote in his first editorial in November of 1910, “The object of this publication is to set forth

death when they see Crispus Attucks, George Washington, William Carney, and Robert E. Lee coming for them in the clouds. The white soldier states:

They stand hand in hand over there and we die hand in hand here on the fields of France. Why couldn't we have lived like this at home? [...] It is one country she will some day be, in truth as well as in spirit – the country of Washington and Attucks, of Lee and Carney. The country of the whites and the country of the blacks. *Our country!*⁷²

Cotter, Jr.'s play was extremely tactical in a variety of ways. First, it undoubtedly appealed to the black community as the witnessed the black officer's commitment to his country, as well as the display of the white soldier's examination of conscience with his apologetic and remorseful prose as well as his hope for unity and equality in the years to come in America. Likewise, Cotter, Jr. attempted to appeal to the white community by also portraying the black soldier's dedication to his country and by leveling the two officers to equality in death on the battlefield. Cotter, Jr. also uses historical figures that are lauded as saints by both the white community, Washington and Lee, and the black community, Attucks and Carney.

For Cotter, Jr., literature, authorship, and intellectual matters were always central to his life. By the age of six, at the start of his elementary education, young Cotter had read thirty books, benefitting from his father's private library and the aid of his sister.

Cotter, Jr. wrote many poems, plays, wrote editorials for the *Louisville Leader*, an

those facts and arguments which show the danger of race prejudice, particularly as manifested today toward colored people. It takes its name from the fact that the editors believe that this is a critical time in the history of the advancement of men. [...] Finally, its editorial page will stand for the rights of men, irrespective of color or race, for the highest ideals of American democracy, and for reasonable but earnest and persistent attempts to gain these rights and realize these ideals."

⁷²Ibid.

African American newspaper in Louisville, and even wrote a book entitled *The Band of Gideon*. His father said of Cotter, Jr. on his disposition and world-view:

He was quiet, kind, serious, and would fight when necessary. He was courteous in the extreme and rather fastidious in dress. He was always popular in a crowd because he knew how to draw others out. He was one of the best-informed persons on world-movements, the race question, and athletics I have ever met.⁷³

Cotter, Jr. quite possibly, would have surpassed his father in his prolificacy in writing, but died terribly young. He contracted tuberculosis in his second year at Fisk University, and lived as an invalid for the last six years of his life before he died at the age of 23 in 1919 (See Fig. 8).

⁷³ Cotter, "Joseph Seamon Cotter, Jr."



Joseph Seamon Cotter Jr.
September 2, 1895- February 3, 1919

Figure 8. Joseph Seamon Cotter, Jr.
Courtesy of Academy of American Poets

Beyond his care and devotion to his own children, Cotter, Sr. was deeply passionate about the children to whom he served as an educator and community member. Storytelling was of central importance to Cotter, and he used it as a method for self-expression and education in his work with students. Most likely passed down to him from his mother, Cotter believed that storytelling was a way to open the doors of fantasy to children, as well as an excellent educational experience. He told stories in schools, in churches, on playgrounds, and in the library. He organized storytelling contests and leagues within the schools, and most notably began the storytelling contest at the Western Branch of the Louisville Free Public Library.⁷⁴

Thomas F. Blue and Albert E. Meyzeek inspired by the urgings of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, just as Cotter was, believed that social uplift began with education. Blue and Meyzeek, contemporaries of Cotter, founded the Western Branch and was the first branch in the South to serve the black community. Louisville eventually opened an Eastern Branch to serve African Americans, establishing the first black library department in the United States.⁷⁵ These new libraries established unique educational opportunities for the black population of Louisville, and Cotter was influential in utilizing the resources of the library to educate his community in an engaging way through his storytelling contest.

This contest became one of Cotter's most influential legacies in the city. The contest originated with Cotter offering \$5.00 to the child who could most accurately tell a

⁷⁴ Shockley, "Joseph Seamon Cotter, Sr.," 334-335.

⁷⁵ Jacob Burrell, "The Colored Librarian: Thomas F. Blue and the Louisville Free Public Library's Colored Department, 1905-1935" (MA Thesis, University of Louisville, 2016), 1-3, 7.

story that he or she heard during story hour. The storytelling “bee” began to grow and was soon sponsored by the Children’s Department at the library in the year 1913. Cotter established a set of rules that were designed to keep kids in school, become regulars at their local library, and to foster a sense of pride and enthusiasm for learning. The competitors in the contest had to attend at least eight story hours, be a member of the library, keep good attendance at school, and have heard their story during one of the story hours.⁷⁶ By 1916, the Eastern Branch of the public library was participating as well, and the contest became a week-long event commemorated as “Cotter Storytelling Week.”⁷⁷ By 1918, schools and libraries in other cities adopted the concept of the contest, and Cotter’s Cup evolved to multiple levels of competition. The winners from the Eastern Branch got to compete against the winners from the Western Branch, and the winner of the championship round would win a silver loving cup.⁷⁸ The contest continued for years and has colloquially become known, as simply, the “Cotter Cup” (See Fig. 9).

⁷⁶ Shockley, “Joseph S. Cotter, Sr.,” 333-335.

⁷⁷ “Negro Children To Hold Story-telling Contest,” *Courier-Journal*, April 29, 1916.

⁷⁸ “Colored Children Hold Story-telling Contest,” *Courier-Journal*, April 19, 1918.



Figure 9. Cotter Cup
Courtesy of the Louisville Free Public Library, Western Branch

Apart from his educational work, Cotter worked tirelessly for the uplift of black Louisville neighborhoods through community organizing and respectability politics. In the 1870s, Cotter was one of the only black individuals living in the area of the city which was later recognized as *Colored Parkland* or *Little Africa* located in the West End of Louisville, which is now known as a historically black neighborhood. Cotter wrote a history of the neighborhood in 1916 to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of its founding. Cotter notes that different communities referred to the neighborhood by different names; the white community called it the *Homestead* and then *Parkland*, and the black community called it *Needmore* and then *Little Africa*. In 1916, at the time of Cotter's written historical account, Little Africa had over 700 homes, six churches, seven grocery stores, a school, a drug store, the Parkland Improvement Club, and a mayor. Cotter was the momentum behind the anniversary celebration and saw it as an opportunity to celebrate the community and its achievements, but also as time to continue to improve the neighborhood. Over a weekend-long event, Cotter, along with the Parkland Improvement Club, they paved sidewalks, installed mailboxes, and leveled roads.

Little Africa became not only a residential district, but a safe haven for the black community of Louisville to prosper and seek respectability when they faced oppression elsewhere throughout in the city. Cotter wrote a "creed" for the Improvement Club that spoke to the necessity of education and care for the community's children, and urged his neighbors to "pledge ourselves to be responsible for the order and progress of the city to

the extent of our families and the influence we have upon our neighbors.”⁷⁹ Cotter commented on the status of the black settlement: “It is in a part of the city where the word ‘segregation’ breeds no terror and conjures up no law suits. The people believe in pigs and chickens, gardens and children, churches and charity.”⁸⁰ This was not to say that segregation and racial discrimination had not negatively impacted the community, but that the black individuals living and excelling in Little Africa were doing so despite the laws and culture that was actively working against them. The community’s own hard work and perseverance created the sanctity of life in Little Africa all on its own.

Many white individuals in the city’s government and school board penned responses to Cotter’s history of Little Africa, and the content and tone of these responses reveal the larger paternalistic nature of white Louisville towards the African American community. Circuit Court Judge Harry Robinson congratulated Cotter “upon the wonderful strides made by the Little City during the past few years, which bears ample and eloquent tribute to the splendid citizenship, and law-abiding community of which you are the fortunate possessor.”⁸¹ Robinson’s words appear as though he is congratulating the community for not falling into the same vice and neglect as other black communities. Robinson detailed all the progress the community has made from “a gully infested commons into a beautiful hamlet,” a series of demeaning and belittling descriptions that belie the white supremacist paternalism embraced by white leaders like Robison. In closing, he says to keep up the good work, and that the community has his

⁷⁹ Joseph S. Cotter, Sr., “Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the Founding of Colored Parkland or ‘Little Africa:’ Louisville, Kentucky 1891-1916,” *Courier-Journal*, July 23, 1916, 12.

⁸⁰ Cotter, “Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the Founding of Colored Parkland or ‘Little Africa:’ Louisville, Kentucky 1891-1916,” *Courier-Journal*, July 23, 1916, 7-9, 12-14.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

best wishes.⁸² Robinson's response, along with the other responses, read like progress reports from a teacher to a pupil, and all have a semblance of surprise grounded within them as if Parkland's success, and by extension, black self-determination, is unlikely. This was the community Cotter lived in, and the larger cultural attitudes that his writing sought to counteract.

While there have been brief introductions to Cotter's writing, I believe it is necessary to engage in a more extensive analysis of Cotter's writings in the context of Louisville's white paternalism and the white supremacism revealed by minstrelsy. One of the more overlooked pieces that reveals how Cotter used literary expression as a tool for counteracting white supremacy is his re-written lyrics for Stephen Foster's "My Old Kentucky Home." Cotter was always intrigued by the relationship between his mother's work at Federal Hill and the song's rampant popularity in his country, state, and city, and felt that the song and its implications for the black community were intrinsically linked to Cotter's own life and work. In his unpublished autobiography, he noted that his mother began bond-slavery at the plantation exactly one year after the song was originally published, was one of the first individuals to hear the song performed at Federal Hill, and died in 1906, which was the homecoming year at the plantation in honor of Stephen Foster. And on May 9th, 1921, what would have been Martha Vaughn's eighty-first birthday, Kentuckians began to urge the state government to purchase Federal Hill Plantation and turn it into a state park.

While Cotter was prolific, and wrote hundreds of poems, songs, and plays in his lifetime, his response to "My Old Kentucky Home" remains paramount among his other

⁸² Ibid., 19.

works and holds a specific importance to this narrative for a multitude of reasons.

Foster's acclaimed song had begun to turn Kentucky's poor reputation around with the help of the Kentucky Derby, and the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis that featured a pavilion antebellum style mansion entitled "My New Kentucky Home," equipped with a musician endlessly performing the song and distributing Foster's sheet music. For Cotter, the song was a reminder of his mother's toils as a bond slave, and the continued bondage of black individuals to the minstrel tradition.

Here it is necessary to understand the origins of the song and its lyrics to evaluate the Cotter's revision years later. Foster reputedly wrote his ode to the happy plantation slave of the South out of inspiration by the Federal Hill plantation where Cotter's mother grew up. The Rowans, the family of Federal Hill, were distant cousins of the Fosters. Foster's sister Charlotte visited Federal Hill many times as a child and received a marriage proposal from one of the Rowan sons as a teenager. However, Charlotte was poor in health and died shortly after the proposal in Louisville. There is no evidence that Stephen Foster himself ever visited the Bardstown home, but it is likely that his inspiration for the song was garnered through letters written to him by his sister – if the song was based off the Rowan plantation at all. Despite its connection to the now Kentucky State Park, "My Old Kentucky Home" assuredly holds connections to Kentucky as a part of the slaveholding south.

As previously argued, minstrelsy was grounded in maintaining racial order after Emancipation, and "My Old Kentucky Home" was no exception. Foster wrote the song originally for the 1853 Christy's Minstrels, which was an extremely famous traveling blackface troupe, with the original title and lyrics as "Poor Uncle Tom," instead of "My

Old Kentucky Home” (See Fig. 10). Foster clearly found inspiration in the wildly famous anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* written by Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1852. There is no evidence as to why Foster changed the lyrics, but it is likely he changed it so as not to offend slaveholding whites who were the primary audience of Christy’s Minstrels.⁸³ Like most popular books of its time, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was eventually adapted into a stage production that was cast as white actors in blackface and essentially became another minstrel performance with “plantation shouters,” “pickaninny bands,” Ethiopian choruses, Jubilee singers, and “cake walkers” (See Fig. 10) Despite its minstrel-esque nature on the stage, Southern cities did not want the play performed in their hometowns. In 1902, the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) protested the production of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* at the Lexington, Kentucky Opera House due to the portrayal of slavery as a cruel institution. Lexington, like Louisville adopted Confederate culture post-war. And like in Louisville, black Lexingtonians began to protest and fight for their rights as citizens. This African American resistance to both the white embrace of Confederate culture and the implementation of segregation played out in the fight over *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.⁸⁴ Just as racial negotiations in Lexington coalesced around the production of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Cotter used literature as a means of pushing back against racist attitudes with his re-write of “My Old Kentucky Home” (See Fig. 11).

⁸³ Tom Eblen, “The Origin Story of ‘My Old Kentucky Home’ Intrigues Emily Bingham,” *Kentucky Press News Service*, May 2, 2018.

⁸⁴ Ann E. Marshall, “The 1906 Uncle Tom’s Cabin Law and the Politics of Race and Memory in Early-Twentieth-Century Kentucky,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 1, no. 3 (September 2011): 368-369, 372, 375.

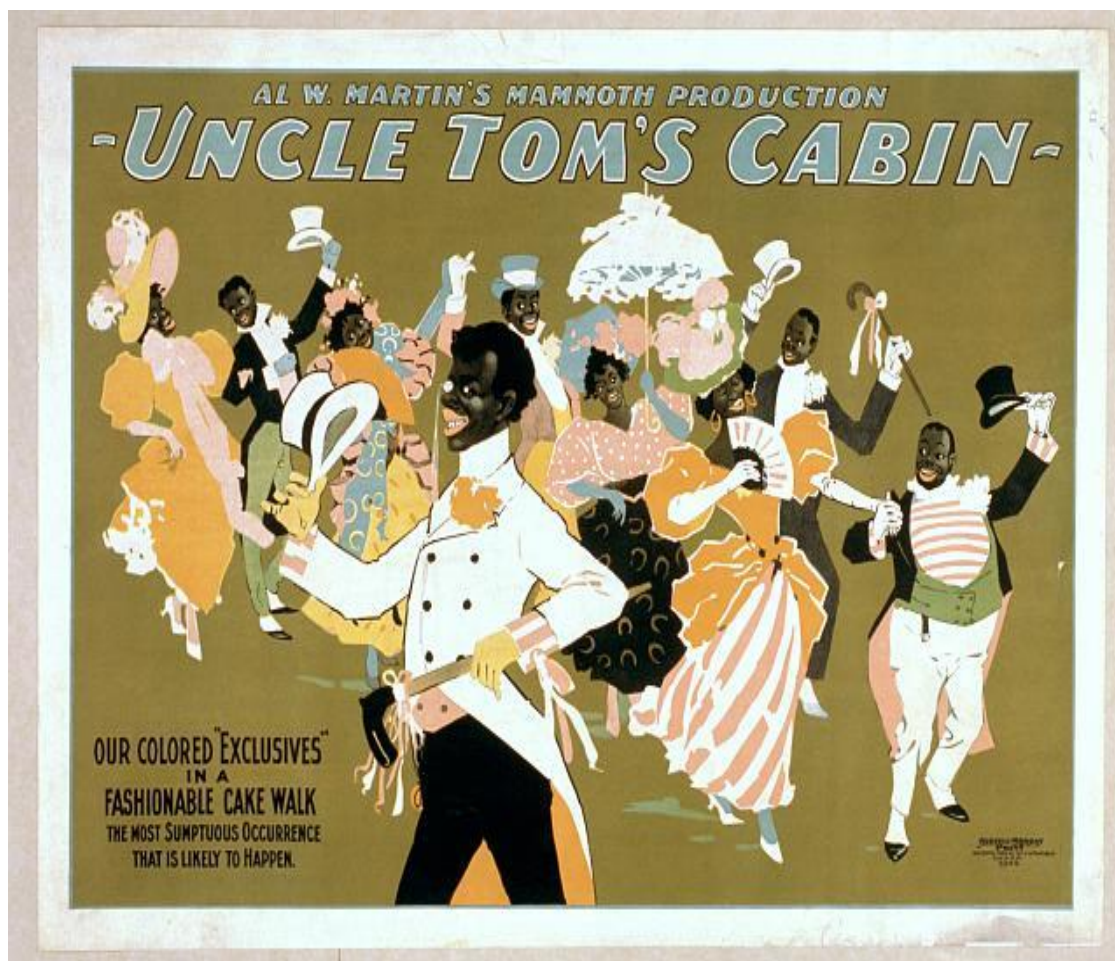


Figure 10. "Uncle Tom's Cabin," A.L. Martin's Production, 1898
Courtesy of the Library of Congress, American Variety Stage: Vaudeville and Popular Entertainment Collection

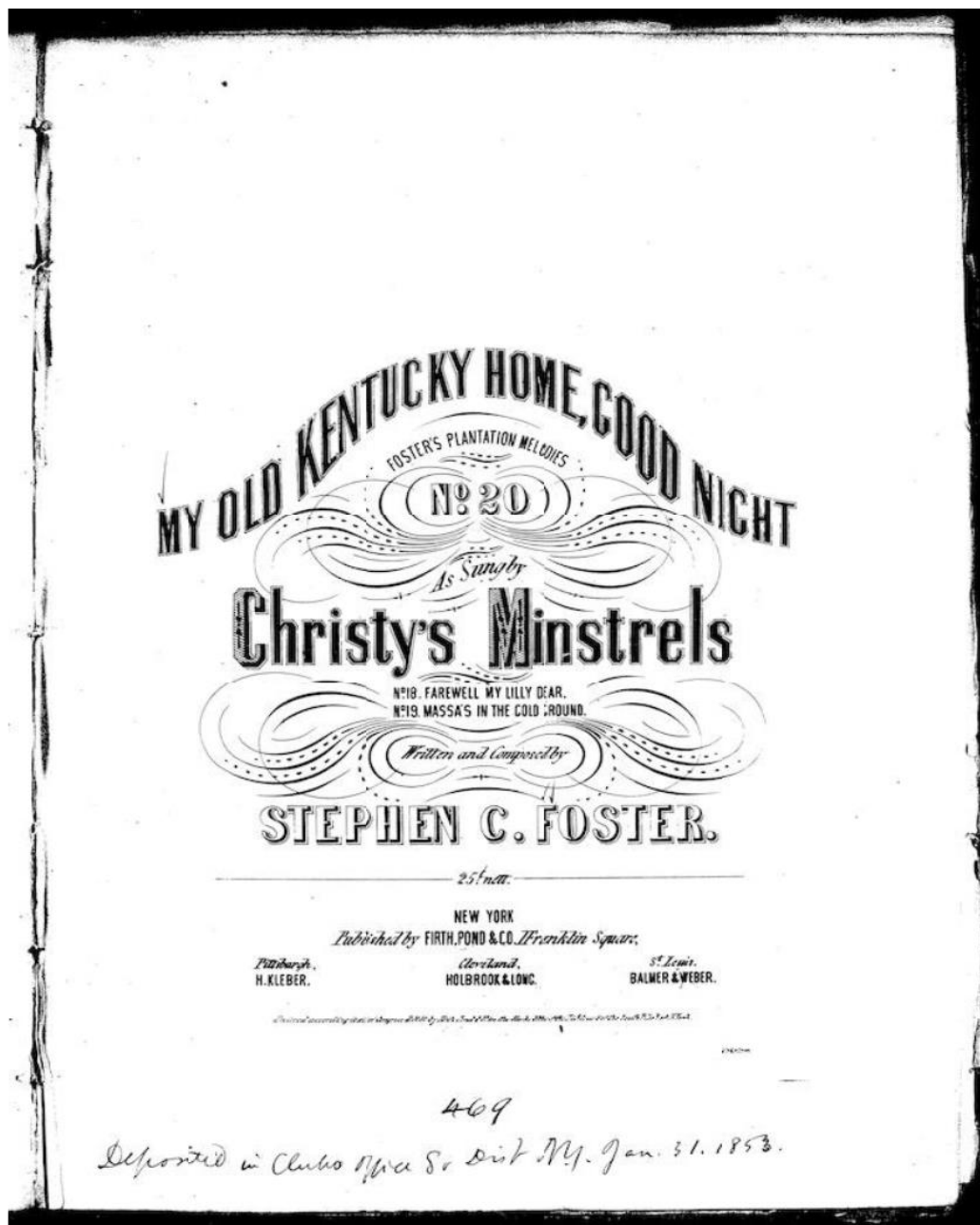


Figure 11. "My Old Kentucky Home, Good Night," Christy's Minstrels, 1853
Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Music for the Nation Collection

Cotter found inspiration to rewrite the song through a visit to the farm where his mother had been enslaved, a site which also happened to be the site commemorated as the inspiration for Foster. In 1921, Cotter returned to Bardstown for a visit after an absence of fifty-three years, and sixty-eight years removed from the original publishing of Foster's song. Cotter wrote a reflective essay detailing the visit.⁸⁵ According to the piece, as Cotter walked up to the doors of Federal Hill he tried to imagine his mother there by "trying to think my mother's thoughts."⁸⁶ Mrs. Madge Rowan Frost, the granddaughter of the founders of the plantation and the last familial owner of the property, welcomed Cotter in. Frost's black servant gave Cotter a tour of the house, whom Cotter referred to as the "little brown guide."⁸⁷ Cotter reflected on the significance of the legacy of slavery, musing that if "the inheritance of past ages be laid at the feet of the black child as it is at the feet of a white child, a new page would soon be written in the affairs of men."⁸⁸ Frost showed Cotter the desk at which Stephen Foster supposedly wrote the lyrics to "My Old Kentucky Home." Cotter touched the desk and said he could hear the "civilized world" singing along to the tune.⁸⁹

For Cotter, the nostalgic lost-cause narrative perpetuated by the song was incompatible with and detrimental to the racial uplift goals embraced by black Americans. As Cotter strolled down Springfield Pike in Bardstown, he found himself humming along to Foster's melody and reflected, "Some of Foster's wording and

⁸⁵ Joseph Seamon Cotter, Sr., "My Visit to Nelson County, Kentucky." Unpublished, Lou C. 6, Cotter Papers, Louisville Free Public Library, Western Branch.

⁸⁶ Cotter, "My Visit to Nelson County, Kentucky."

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

sentiment do not suit the present day Negro, and unless there is a change, he [referring to himself] will cease to sing the song. By doing so he will lose the uplifting influence of a beautiful melody and along with it, a page of race history.”⁹⁰ In response, Cotter suggested two new stanzas be added to “My Old Kentucky Home,” to be sung as the second and third verses. This addition would reflect the progress of the black community, and to establish the changes that need to be made in American society regarding civil liberties of the black American:

They hunt no more for the possum and the coon,
On the meadow, the hill and the shore.
They sing no more by the glimmer of the moon,
On the bench by the old cabin door.
The day trips by with a solace for the heart,
To charm it and give it delight.
The time has come when the Negro does his part,
To make my old Kentucky home all right.

The time has come when the head will never bow,
Wherever the Negro may go.
A few more years and he'll shift the weary load
So that it will ever be light.
A few more years and he'll triumph on the road,
And sing, My old Kentucky home's all right.⁹¹

As beautiful and timely as Cotter's additions are, white Kentuckians maintained the traditional lyrics that harkened to a moment when racial control was codified in slavery law. Every year, 150,000 people present at Churchill Downs and across the globe come together on the first Saturday in May to collectively sing “My Old Kentucky Home,” and until 1986, the lyrics were officially, “‘Tis summer the darkies are gay” when “darkies” was corrected to “people” by the Kentucky House Assembly.⁹² But, people had been

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Eblen, “The Origin Story of ‘My Old Kentucky Home’ Intrigues Emily Bingham.”

protesting the lyrics since the NAACP brought attention to the song's racism in the 1920s in the following years after Cotter's rewrite, and the protests came to a head during the 1967 civil rights protest in Louisville that led to the cancellation of Derby events and featured a poster that read, "The darkies are no longer gay," almost fifty years after Cotter's proposed additions and corrections.⁹³

Cotter's rewrite of "My Old Kentucky Home," holds significant importance to the cultural, social, and political sentiments of the city of Louisville even today. But, in order to continue to analyze Cotter's artistry and how it was used as a reclaiming tool and as racial uplift, evaluation of Cotter's contemporaries and the techniques used by black artists to confront minstrel forms is necessary. Ann Marshall discusses controversies over the stage production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* at the Opera House in Lexington, Kentucky, and she uses this protest to talk about the contest and debate of historical memory over the Civil War and slavery in both white and black spheres. Marshall states,

Historians have concentrated on African American's efforts to define themselves and their communal history separately from and outside white narratives. By doing so, historians are, in part, reflecting the realities of black life in the Jim Crow South. For the majority of southern blacks, who were poor and preoccupied with matters of daily survival, there was little time to invest in the politics of memory. Middle-class African Americans, meanwhile, were largely concerned with matters of "racial uplift," which focused on improving living and educational opportunities for their communities.⁹⁴

Marshall's argument is precisely mine as well; that it would be impossible to analyze Cotter and his artistry if his black art was not placed in context in the white, national narrative in which it existed. Cotter's art was formed in response to Louisville's white community and their ideas of racial superiority. Furthermore, the idea of racial uplift in

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Marshall, "The 1906 Uncle Tom's Cabin Law," 370.

Marshall's piece reminded me of the way Ann Allen Shockley describes Cotter, of whose writing she says "moralized the need for blacks to be honest, helpful to each other, thrifty, industrious, and weighed good over evil. These particular virtues brought about in his poems and stories reflected an accommodationist [sic] in dealing with whites."⁹⁵ Even though Cotter was aware of the racial injustices happening about him, he knew that in order to be taken seriously and received by the white community, he had to present himself in such a way that he believed would gain him respect as a black man in a white circle.

Many contemporaries of Cotter implemented similar tactics in finessing creative production to subtly critique white supremacy. Black artists would model themselves on white, Eurocentric standards while also using black resistance as the content of their creativity. Black artists who worked with the sonnet form are one example of this, and Cotter wrote a few sonnets of his own. James Hatch argues that in writing in "European" standards with Shakespearean sonnets and certain playwriting elements reminiscent of "classical" style, black artists were utilizing these styles and many other techniques as well to show white audiences their capacity and to prove their intellectual abilities to themselves as well.⁹⁶ At the close of the Civil War, ninety percent of the black population of America was illiterate, and by 1910 two-thirds possessed literacy.⁹⁷ This rapid growth led to new newspapers, cultural tastes, aspirations, and intellectual, economic, and political access. Debates flourished on what African Americans should call themselves in their new press, and Du Bois argued that no matter the term, it should be capitalized in

⁹⁵ Shockley, "Joseph S. Cotter, Sr.," 338.

⁹⁶ Hatch, "Introduction," in *Lost Plays of the Harlem Renaissance*, 11-13.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

the same fashion as French, English, and Irish – “‘Negroes’ were a people!”⁹⁸ And while the Harlem Renaissance is usually understood as surge of black art in the 1920s in New York, many historians have proclaimed both the term “renaissance” and the time and space it took place in as a misnomer.⁹⁹ By extension, Cotter and other black writers that operated or operate currently outside of the time and place of the “Harlem Renaissance” still share a part in the contributions of artistry in the black community. Hatch also argues that the Harlem Renaissance should not be looked at as a “re-birth” but rather as “a new child with a new voice” dispelling the myth that black artists were appropriating “classical” culture, but rather re-fashioning and re-claiming different art forms to establish their voice, their intellectual ability, and strength.¹⁰⁰ Black artists looked to Western art as a “neutral” dialect, meaning they thought of it as neither white nor black, but rather more of a universal technique.

Joseph Cotter is a fine example of such, as he both predates the Harlem Renaissance and was also geographically distant from that milieu. Both Kellner and Hatch argue that black art, as it has always existed, shares the same rights of recognition that authors in the Harlem Renaissance do. Hatch in his dispelling of the term “re-birth” is showing that black art since the Civil War was operating in the same function as that during the Harlem Renaissance, it was just that the Harlem Renaissance had a particular sense of self-reflection and awareness in their artistry as social commentary and change that earlier black artists did not have. Hatch states, “The plays in this anthology are all documents of African American persistence under extreme duress, they are witness to

⁹⁸Hatch, “Introduction,” in *Lost Plays of the Harlem Renaissance*, 11.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 16-17.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

human hope and dignity, and in that sense, they were never ‘lost.’ The dream did not die.”¹⁰¹ By placing Cotter within the context of both the historical reality of the black population at the time – low literacy rates and improper and unequal education, as well as what was happening with black artistry in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, we can see how Cotter was both working against racial oppression in art and in society, as well as pulling from and tapping into black artistic forms that had been developing since the close of the Civil War.

Examining some of Cotter’s contemporaries, friends, and inspiration will assist in the further analysis of Cotter’s writing. Black artists like Dunbar, Du Bois, Washington, Johnson, as well as Cotter, Jr. and Sr. felt enormous pressure to respond to racial forms like Jim Crow segregation, disenfranchisement, minstrelsy, plantation literature, and vaudeville. Dunbar, perhaps the most famous black poet of his time, institutes one of the more prevalent tactics used by black artists in his piece “We Wear the Mask.” This poem most effectively reveals how black artists attempted to both respond to their racist world as well as document true black emotion, which is known as dualism – also used by Du Bois, Washington, and Cotter. The mask is a metaphor for the blackface masks worn in minstrelsy and vaudeville, which represents the “assumed” version of black individuals in Jim Crow and coon song tropes, which then, the counterfeit, becomes the version of black individuals in the minds of both white and black Americans.¹⁰² Beyond the faux recreation of black bodies and intellect in minstrel forms, Dunbar comments on the real emotion of black individuals. He states, “With torn and bleeding hearts we smile, and

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 19.

¹⁰² Smethurst, *African American Roots of Modernism*, 32-33.

mouth with myriad subtleties.”¹⁰³ Dunbar also utilized the Negro dialect in his poetry, as a turning away from the “Negro dialect” which was created by a white man, and used as a patronizing minstrel form, to a shift towards “regionalism,” which still implemented the dialect, but was meant to be more representative of black life of the time.

Dunbar and Cotter were friends, and Dunbar’s art inspired deeply influenced Cotter in both topic and technique. Dunbar visited the Cotter home in 1894 for Thanksgiving. Cotter noted that it was here on Magazine Street in Louisville, Kentucky that Dunbar first read his Negro dialect poetry that later made him famous.¹⁰⁴ After his visit, Dunbar penned a poem dedicated to Cotter entitled, “After a Visit,” but it was not published until 1913. He writes his poem in the Negro dialect, and speaks of the gracious Southern hospitality he was shown while in Kentucky, even mentioning that he talked about his trip so favorably and so frequently that his family became perturbed by the subject.¹⁰⁵

See jest how they give you welcome
To the best that’s in the land,
Feel the sort o’ grip they give you
When they take you by the hand.
Hear ‘em say, “We ‘re glad to have you,
Better stay a week er two;”
An’ the way they treat you makes you
Feel that ev’ry word is true.

He concludes,

Well, pleg—gone it, I ‘m jes’ tickled,
Bein’ tickled ain’t no sin;

¹⁰³ Paul Laurence Dunbar, “We Wear the Mask,” in *Majors and Minors* (Toledo: Hadley and Hadley, Printers and Binders, 1895).

¹⁰⁴ Joseph Seamon Cotter, Sr., “Joseph Seamon Cotter, Jr.,” Box “Lou C. 6,” Cotter Papers, Louisville Free Public Library, Western Branch.

¹⁰⁵ Paul Laurence Dunbar, “After a Visit,” in *The Complete Poems of Paul Laurence Dunbar* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1913).

I be'n down in ole Kentucky,
An' I want o' go ag'in.¹⁰⁶

Here, his use of the Negro dialect in the form of regionalism intends not to patronize the speech of the black community but attempts to address what life looked like for black southerners – even though his experience with black southern life was limited. Author Sterling Brown said of Dunbar's use of regionalism that "Unlike Irwin Russell [white inventor of the black dialect], whose views of Negro life and character are those of an outsider on a different plane, Dunbar, writing more from within, humanizes his characters and gets more of their true life. There is still, however, a great deal omitted. His picture is undoubtedly idealized."¹⁰⁷ Cotter was wholeheartedly aware of this idealized image of his southern city apparent in Dunbar's piece, and corrects that picturesque version of Louisville in his response to "After a Visit." Cotter makes sure to note that yes, Kentucky can be hospitable on the first impression, but over time, has the intense ability to abhor relentless hatred to certain members of her community as well:

Not that she's inclined to hold back
With the good, and give the worst;
But, you know, in all fair dealin',
What is first must be the first
So, when she takes key the second
An' gives it a twist or two
(Maybe I ought not to say it)
It'll most nigh startle you.

An' then keys the third and fourth, sir,
(Not to speak of all the rest)
Wouldn't stop at crackin' buttons,
They'd jest smash that Sunday vest.
And your happiness would find, sir,
A momentum then and there
That would carry it a-sweepin'

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Sterling Brown, *Negro Poetry and Drama: Revisiting the Voices of Early African American Figures* (Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1937).

Through the stronghold of despair.¹⁰⁸

Cotter's response reveals the true black experience in the city of Louisville. It has been lauded as a place of southern charm and hospitality, and while this hospitable spirit may be extended to visitors, it is not extended to black residents.

Booker T. Washington's work at Tuskegee was also extremely influential to Cotter as an artist and social activist. One of Washington's most famous quotes is, "If you want to lift yourself up, lift up someone else," which is true of Washington's work and was deeply rooted in Cotter's as well. Cotter learned from Washington's ability to raise money and garner support from white politicians and businessmen and implemented many of his tactics into his own work and writing, this is especially evident in Cotter's history of Little Africa. In Cotter's poem, "Tuskegee," Cotter reveals his opinions about Tuskegee and Washington's work, "Tuskegee blazes in the nation's eye, [...] Tuskegee started as an uncouth name, [...] Tuskegee lifts the Negro nearer to God, [...] Tuskegee trains the hand to train the head, [...] Tuskegee's other name is Washington!"¹⁰⁹ Evidence of Cotter's lauding of Washington's success at Tuskegee, allows us to trace Washington's influence throughout Cotter's life and work.

Cotter devoted most of his writing to exploring the nuanced race relations in his city and attempted to redefine what it meant to be a black person in early twentieth century America. He published a compilation of his poetry in 1909 entitled *A White Song and a Black One*.¹¹⁰ The compilation of poems and songs is separated into two parts; the first on the white perspective – a white song, and in the second section, a black

¹⁰⁸ Joseph Seamon Cotter, Sr., "Answer to Dunbar's 'After a Visit,'" Box, "Lou C. 5.2," Cotter Papers, Louisville Free Public Library, Western Branch.

¹⁰⁹ Cotter, *A White Song and A Black One*, 39-40.

¹¹⁰ Cotter, *A White Song and A Black One*.

perspective – a black one. In the “Black One” he even alters his prose to reflect that of the Negro dialect of the time. Cotter dedicates the “White Song” portion to the “lovers of both white and black humanity,” and lists prominent white Louisvillians working in the community at the time: Henry Watterson, Bishop Charles Edward Woodcock, Col. Bennett Young, and Robert E. Woods.¹¹¹ In this work, he is toeing the line of attempting to appeal to the white community with an attempt to instruct black audiences with appropriate response to oppression and resistance.

Many of Cotter’s poems within a “White Song” relate to the outcome of the Civil War as Cotter was born in the year in which it began, and his city sincerely struggled with its identity in the years following. On the description of Louisville as a border city, Cotter describes his home as the South, in the first poem of the work, “My South,” backing up the claim that Louisville, along with the rest of Kentucky, defaulted to southern culture and identity after the Emancipation Proclamation.¹¹² In another poem, also in a “White Song,” Cotter breaks down the outcome of the Civil War in “Grant and Lee.” He opens with the following stanza,

The South’s the sin? The North’s the glory?
Laugh out of court the hackneyed story.
The sin took root in the nation’s heart
And North and South played a dual part.¹¹³

Cotter dismantles the idea that the North was the savior of the enslaved population and the South was the root of the problem. The North believed that slavery was a moral issue, not an issue of racial inequality. The majority of white northerners still believed they were racially superior to the black population but did not believe they could perpetuate

¹¹¹ Ibid., 110.

¹¹² Ibid., 11-12.

¹¹³ Ibid., 13.

the institution for moral and religious convictions. The sin that took root in the Nation's heart is slavery. In the last two stanzas, Cotter turns to discuss the military generals mentioned in the title:

Neither Grant of the North nor Lee of the South
Shall link his name with the cannon's mouth:
Neither Lee of the South nor Grant of the North
Shall stand accused when the blame goes forth.

In the South's warm heart, on the North's just tongue,
A dual epic of peace is sung
With regret for the bond and hope for the free
And a God-like love for Grant and Lee.

Here, Cotter is explicitly discussing the "Lost-Cause" sentiments that arose in the decades following the Civil War. Cotter recognizes that both of these generals have been elevated to sanctity in our Nation's eyes, and neither receive the blame that they both share in the thousands of deaths caused by the violence of the Civil War, as well as the blame the entire Nation shares for the hundreds of years of institutionalized slavery. A stanza from the middle of the poem that discusses those deaths reads as such:

And who were the heroes? Great souls who fed
The nation's maw with the nation's dead
Till the nation's blood slew the nation's curse,
And made man free as the universe.¹¹⁴

What is so interesting about Cotter's prose and also reveals the genius of his artistry is that the white leaders of Louisville in 1909 would not have necessarily caught on to his critique of the Lost Cause, and his commentary on the black experience post-Civil War. Cotter's line, "made man free as the universe" likely would make white audiences think that he is applauding the work of Grant and Lee, which stand in as representatives for the respective Union and Confederate armies, for overcoming their differences to sing "a

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

duel epic of peace,” to free the slaves and enter into this unity of freedom with the universe.¹¹⁵ Placed in the context of the rest of Cotter’s poetry, we know that he does not believe this ideal, but his ploy to reach out to white audiences is successful in his time and remains important to be looked at today for his brilliant duality in his artistry.

Cotter’s “Black One,” implements the use of “black dialect,” to not only reclaim this demeaning form, but to institute his intentional use of the dialect for the black community. In Cotter’s “Black One” he again dedicated it to lovers of both white and black humanity and lists prominent black men from the community of Louisville and from national movements as well: Booker T. Washington, Leroy Ferguson, C. H. Parrish, Alexander Morris, Rev. Thomas F. Blue, and Prof. John H. Jackson.¹¹⁶ A “Black One” also implemented a dual purpose, one of which was a reclaiming of minstrel forms such as the “Negro,” or “Black Dialect,” which was briefly introduced by the works of Dunbar. The literature was created by a white Mississippian, Irwin Russell who served as a medical doctor for the Confederate Army during the Civil War. Russell himself admitted to stealing black dialect from a black woman. He states,

It was almost an inspiration. You know I am something of a banjoist. Well, one evening I was sitting in our back yard in old Mississippi 'twanging' on a banjo, when I heard the missis our colored domestic, an old darky of the Aunt Dinah pattern-- singing one of the out-landish camp-meeting hymns, of which the race is so fond. She was extremely 'religious' character, and, although seized with the impulse to do so, I hesitated to take up the tune and finish it. I did, however; and in the dialect I have adopted, which I then thought and still think is in strict conformity to their use of it, I proceeded as one inspired, to compose verse after verse.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 38.

¹¹⁷ Charles C. Marble, "Irwin Russell," *Critic*, XIII (October 27, 1888), 199.

Black dialect was used as a condescending way to summarize the black experience from the white perspective and to maintain racial hierarchy. The Civil War was fought out all over again in literature and on the stage: White authors poached African American art and culture and turning into satire and using it as a way to keep black folks in their stations as poor and illiterate, while black authors attempted to reclaim these forms of literature and transform it back to resemble black folk culture – both Dunbar and Cotter implemented this form. Cotter used the black dialect or the Negro dialect in a “Black One,” but also used it to reach out to the black community and warn them the pitfalls of laziness, indifference, and vice in his poems, “The Loafing Negro,” “The Don’t Care Negro,” “Lazy Sam,” and “The Vicious Negro.” Yet again, a duality and double-voiced nature of Cotter’s artistry shines through. His writing warned Black citizens about falling into the stereotypes perpetuated in minstrel forms of popular entertainment. However, to a white audience, it would likely be read as just another minstrel trope, which the community enjoyed.

Beyond his many poems and songs, Cotter was also one of the first African American playwrights to be published in the U.S. in 1901 by the Bradley and Gilbert Company with *Caleb the Degenerate*. Despite Cotter’s achievement, the editor of the *Courier-Journal* patronizingly commented that “The author is one of a race that has given scarcely anything of literature to the world.”¹¹⁸ To this point, white scholars asserted that black poetry began with Phillis Wheatley, disappeared for over one hundred years, and reemerged with Dunbar, but Joan Sherman argues that there were at least 130 black men and women who published poetry during the 18th and nineteenth century, but

¹¹⁸ Joseph S. Cotter, Sr., *Caleb the Degenerate* (Louisville: Bradley and Gilbert Company, 1901), “The Author.”

simply were not recognized by literature critics of the time.¹¹⁹ Meaning, that the declaration about Cotter by the editor, was only meant to depreciate African American art, and actively ignore their contributions to literature, theatre, and authorship. And as previously deducted, African American art resided at the epicenter of American popular culture in minstrelsy.

Caleb the Degenerate encapsulates Cotter's reclaiming of black folk culture from white minstrelsy and asserts and establishes an authentic black voice. The play focuses on two main characters: Rahab is a figure who represents the poor leadership and education that has been distributed to the black community, and Caleb is a depraved pupil learning nothing of importance from Rahab. The other characters, the Bishop and Olivia represent the best versions of what Cotter describes as "Negro manhood and Negro womanhood."¹²⁰ The fifth character, Dude, represents a black political agent, which is how Cotter invoked the potential of human expression and agency located within the minds and hearts of black individuals, in response to disenfranchisement of black citizens. Cotter closes his preface with, "I am a Negro and I speak from experience."¹²¹ This clear statement from Cotter also eloquently pointed to the nature of his creative outputs. Yes, he attempted to provide the world with a picture of what black potential looks like, a very forward thinking, future goal, But his authorship also illuminates Cotter himself and who he was – a man who was raised by his formerly enslaved mother, a self-educated worker, an uplift-oriented cultural voice, a black artists, and an artist who created within the context of white popular entertainment in minstrel forms. Taken en

¹¹⁹ Joan R. Sherman, *Invisible Poets: Afro-Americans of the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), vii.

¹²⁰ Cotter, *Caleb the Degenerate*, "Preface."

¹²¹ Ibid.

masse, Cotter's personal experiences were distinctive and shaped his worldview, but they were also all similar experiences of black people and black intellectuals of the time, and he used this universality to convey powerful narratives that spoke to American blackness in the early twentieth century. His closing statement also speaks to the authenticity of his voice on the subject of "blackness" in response to the cultural violence embedded in the minstrel traditions of Foster, Russell, Haverly and others. That he is a black man, and he, and only he, has the authority to speak on these matters. To further this point, when introducing the characters, he stated that all are American Negroes – none should be confused or mistaken as a white body in a black face or should be cast with black actors if performed.

Cotter comments on the purpose and intention of *Caleb the Degenerate* in his preface, which could very well speak to the purpose and intention of all of Cotter's authorship. For Cotter, "An author puts poetry into the mouths of his characters to show the possibility of individual human expression as illustrated by himself."¹²² Cotter intended to dramatize the contemporary black experience to illuminate the problems facing the black community as Cotter observed in Louisville, to draw some conclusions about how his contemporaries should address such problems, and writing into existence the possibility of black intellectual ability.

Cotter viewed his literature as a part of a broader social movement led by Booker T. Washington, a groundswell which we now identify as an earlier part of the Long Civil Rights Movement.¹²³ He deeply cared for his community and dedicated his creative work

¹²² Cotter, *Caleb the Degenerate*, "Preface."

¹²³ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1233-1263.

to black welfare, education, racial uplift, and ultimately racial equality. His literature and legacy live on as illustrations of early twentieth century racial resistance in the struggle for racial equality in the U.S. Even though Cotter held little to no power of influence in the city of Louisville as an artist due to the standards of art and entertainment that had succumbed to the baseness of minstrelsy, his writings reflect his leadership in black uplift efforts and his resistance through speaking back to Jim Crow stereotypes and white supremacist cultural forms.

Epilogue

By the time of Cotter's death in 1949, the early origins of what we historically account as the traditional Civil Rights Movement was beginning to take shape in the face of continued oppression and little to no change in African American employment opportunities, proper housing, equal education and treatment. Employers continued to bar African Americans from the hiring process, even black veterans returning from World War II. By 1948, the Louisville local office of the U.S. Employment Service recorded four percent of skilled jobs went to African Americans, while forty-two percent of all service positions were filled by black individuals.¹²⁴ Activists in Louisville pushed for a fair employment law as an extension of Roosevelt's Fair Employment Practices Commission, but by 1955, employment opportunities for black workers had hardly budged. Early in the year 1950, civil rights groups attempted to integrate public facilities beginning with hospitals, public auditoriums, parks, and schools, and it was not until after the U.S. Supreme Court decision in Virginia in 1955 that ruled segregation of public parks was illegal that Louisville parks began to allow black patrons on the grounds. But, open accommodations for black individuals in public spaces was not secured until late in the 1960s with the tireless efforts of protestors, the NAACP, and CORE.¹²⁵ The Jefferson County Public School System, in which Joseph Seamon Cotter, Sr. dedicated over thirty years of his life, did not officially desegregate until 1975.¹²⁶ The Open Housing

¹²⁴ *Kentucky's Black Heritage: The Role of Black People in the History of Kentucky From Pioneer Days to the Present* (Frankfort: Kentucky Commission on Human Rights, 1971), 45-46, 87.; Wright, *Life Behind a Veil*, 247-252, 271-273.

¹²⁵ K'Meyer, "Civil Rights in the Gateway to the South," 21-23, 77-81.

¹²⁶ Allison Ross, "JCPS Desegregation Timeline," *Courier-Journal*, September 3, 2015, <https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/education/2015/09/03/jcps-desegregation-timeline/71637432/>

Ordinance was passed 1967, and combined with the desegregation of the public school system led to rampant white flight from the city to the county creating a type of re-segregation in the schools and neighborhoods of the city.¹²⁷ Although Cotter's life and influence were in the early days of the Long Civil Rights Movement, his work impacted the early days of racial uplift and planted seeds that would be fully realized decades later.

The cultural form of minstrelsy also continued to grow and expand into other mediums outside of the vaudeville stage, specifically motion pictures and eventually American television. Scholars have pointed out that vaudeville theatre, grounded in the tradition of minstrelsy, was the first truly American theatre, and out of this tradition would follow similar themes as entertainment developed into motion pictures, screenplays, and television.¹²⁸ For instance, the first incarnation of the now beloved figure Micky Mouse was drawn from traditional blackface stereotypes – the white gloves, the black body and face, the body plasticity. But, beyond his physical appearance, Micky Mouse's first animation, "Steamboat Willie," which first aired in 1928, Micky hums and plays along to a tune that is today known as "Turkey in the Straw," but was originally performed as "Old Zip Coon" from the minstrel stage and originated in 1834.¹²⁹ In the early days of animation, most creators cribbed from the early days of vaudeville, because it was the most popular version of entertainment at the time. Numerous examples of blackface elements, or even blackface characters themselves continued to populate American film and television until the late 1940s. From the early inception of Mickey Mouse and black the crows in *Dumbo* by Disney, to "Coal Black and the Seven

¹²⁷ Aubespain, Clay, and Hudson, *Two Centuries of Black Louisville*, 197-199, 203-204.

¹²⁸ Johnson, *Burnt Cork*.; Taylor and Austen, *Darkest America*.; Watkins, *On the Real Side*.

¹²⁹ Gene Demby, "From Blackface To Blackfishing," *Code Switch*, Podcast Audio, February 13, 2019.

Dwarves” and ten other blackface films from Warner Brothers, to “Scrub Me Mamma with a Boogie Beat” by Universal Pictures in 1941, to even famous and beloved actors and actress such as Judy Garland, Shirley Temple, and Mickey Rooney who all donned blackface in popular American films in the 1930s.¹³⁰ Those eleven blackface films from Warner Brothers are now a part of the “Censored Eleven,” which are films that have been taken out of syndication due to being “too racist.” Many of these films like the Censored Eleven have been retroactively edited or quietly taken out of syndication by film-makers, making people forget how pervasive and popular it used to be.¹³¹

Regardless of the tapering off of the popularity and acceptance of blackface minstrelsy in the mid to late twentieth century, the legacy and negative impact of the artform plagues our Nation’s entertainment sector and race relations up to the present day. Pulitzer prize winning journalist Cynthia Tucker suggests that the reason the form linger is “that this is a country that has failed to grapple with its ugly, violent racial history.”¹³² By refusing to grapple with or even to acknowledge our violent and oppressive racial history, we fall back into the same patterns. In early 2019 several news stories revealed that blackface and minstrel forms did not die with vaudeville or early animation. Virginia Governor Ralph Northam and the Virginia Attorney General Mark Herring both admitted to donning blackface in the 1980s.¹³³ Every Halloween popular

¹³⁰ “Blackface: The Birth of An American Stereotype” Defending Freedom, Defining Freedom, National Museum of African American History and Culture, accessed February 17, 2019, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/blackface-birth-american-stereotype>.

¹³¹ Gene Demby, “From Blackface To Blackfishing.”; Debbie Elliot, “Virginia Scandals Draw Attention To The Dehumanizing History of Blackface,” *NPR*, February 10, 2019.

¹³² Shereen Marisol Meraji and Gene Demby, “We’re Going To Start A Dialogue...Again,” *Code Switch*, Podcast Audio, February 7, 2019.

¹³³ Crystal Hayes, “You cannot get shoe polish off: Virginia governor darkened his face in Michael Jackson costume” *USA Today*, February 2, 2019.

articles circulate about the inappropriateness of the use of blackface in costume. And while the appropriation and degradation of black culture may not be as obvious as a coal black face, for the most part, any longer, black communities still face continued appropriation of their culture and heritage, as well as rampant oppression, inequality, and hatred.

By refusing to grapple with our abhorrent racial history in public spheres as well as on the stage and screen, we will continue perpetuate the racism that came before.

Many film studies scholars and animation lovers alike have come together to deny the minstrel origins of Micky Mouse. It is sometimes difficult to separate an emotional and nostalgic connection for a certain aspect of our culture with its ugly origins. These film lovers' aversion to discussing some dark aspects of Disney resonates with many Kentuckians' aversion to discussing the racist origins of "My Old Kentucky Home."

What is more quintessentially Kentucky than bourbon, bluegrass, and horses? With just a few opening cords of the song on a sunny Saturday in May, Foster's minstrel song turned state anthem brings a crown of 150,000 to tears and whips up the emotion of thousands more in front of their television screens across the world. The unifying nature of "My Old Kentucky Home," as it is understood and used today, is truly an emotion-filled experience. The song has gone through ample alterations and has been refashioned and reclaimed by diverse artists and genres from Linkin' Bridge to Ben Sollee. But its current use and understanding does not negate its origins, or its negative impact on the black community of Kentucky for years. Likewise, this study and knowledge of the unsavory birth of "My Old Kentucky Home" does not mean that it needs to be erased from our history or discontinued as a Kentucky Derby tradition. This also does not mean that since

Micky Mouse originated as a minstrel form that we must cut out Disney from our childhood experiences and our entertainment consumption. Rather, this knowledge calls for education and conversation about the origins of such popular figures and engagement with its reflection of our racial history, and furthermore, how it impacts our entertainment today in regard to diversity and inclusion, and our race relations at large.

Like Cotter, many black artists today still seek to undo the detrimental aspects of and reclaim the stolen cultural heritage present in blackface minstrelsy. In the spring of 2018, artist Donald Glover, under his stage name, Childish Gambino released his now Grammy-winning song, “This is America” with an accompanying music video. The video is teeming with symbolism and commentary that have left music fans and scholars alike scrambling to fully analyze it. From Gambino’s attire, which is meant to appear similar to a Confederate soldier’s uniform, the dancing and facial expressions that seem to harken back to Jim Crow and blackface performances, to the gun violence, poverty, and mayhem that portray a sense of a timeless, unending torture, “turning the suffering and trauma of black people into a cinematic playhouse with no way out,”¹³⁴ the music video represents the struggle of black Americans in the present day. In a country that hails black musicians, dancers, and athletes, yet turns a blind eye when they are gunned down in the streets by police violence and brutality and are demonized for peaceful protest, it would seem as though we have not moved past the days of minstrelsy, blackface, and “Jump Jim Crow.”

¹³⁴ Jason Parham, “Childish Gambino’s ‘This is America’ and the New Shape of Protest Music,” *Wired*, May 9, 2018. <https://www.wired.com/story/donald-glover-this-is-america-protest-music/>.

Looking back once more, Cotter paved a way into white intellectual circles not as an author and educator, but as a black author, a black poet, a black playwright, a black composer, a black teacher, a black mentor, and a black educator. The paternalistic nature of the city of Louisville and the continued black stereotypes presented on stage in the form of minstrelsy never allowed Cotter to be fully equal in the eyes of his white contemporaries and audiences as shown by the responses, critiques, and commentary on his work. In the conclusion of Cotter's autobiography, he writes himself a benediction entitled, "My Immortality." It reads,

I have loved life, I have loved work and when my time comes, I shall be ready to go. Where? I know not. But to whatever part the winds of fate may waft me I shall carry this benediction: I am the son of a mother, who had a singing soul and a toiling hand, the husband of a wife who is careful, patient, and heroic; the father of a son who smiled out of life in his infancy; of a daughter whose young womanhood faded away as she tarried in the court of the Great White Plague; of Joseph who sang salutation to pain and welcomed death. And if there be no journey and no part what does it matter? I have already lived an eternity in the thought of this benediction.¹³⁵

Beyond his heartbreak in the tragedy of losing all three of his children, and his seemingly fruitless labor in terms of social change and justice for his community in his lifetime, Cotter loved life. This love and devotion for his family, his community, his art, and his life carry through the generations separating his life and this work, truly establishing his immortality and legacy.

¹³⁵ Cotter, Chapter 30, "My Immortality."

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